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THE BLUE FLAME

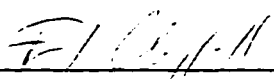
by

Kurt J. Ayau

A Dissertation Submitted to
the Faculty of The Graduate School at
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
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of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

Greensboro
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Approved by



Dissertation Advisor

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AYAU, KURT J. Ph.D. *The Blue Flame*. (1996)
Directed by Fred Chappell. 515 pp.

The Blue Flame is a coming-of-age novel about a thirteen-year-old Cape-Verdean American boy named Rory Chen in the summer of 1971. At the beginning of the novel, Rory is living with his stepfather, Frank Chen, a Chinese-Hawaiian-American restaurant owner and retired Air Force cook, in the small, Central California town of Ferris. Rory's mother, a former nightclub dancer, has deserted them eight years earlier. Rory is not fully aware of his racial background; rather than telling him that he is Cape Verdean, (African and Portuguese), his father has simply said that he is Portuguese. People in Ferris think that the boy is half Portuguese and half Chinese-Hawaiian, hence his golden brown complexion. Rory is aware of his difference from others and anxious about how this difference will affect him in high school. Townspeople and classmates occasionally harass him and his father. His father's response is to be passive and endure. Fighting back against overwhelming odds is not an option.

Rory becomes involved with pyromania with a new boy in the neighborhood, and when the two of them and two other boys burn down the Chen house, Rory takes the blame in order to protect his friend from an abusive father. Meanwhile, Frank's partner in the China Star, their restaurant, has absconded with \$50,000, leaving him responsible for a brand-new bank loan for

that amount. Faced with the prospect of rebuilding his home, running the restaurant, tracking down his partner and raising a son he feels he can no longer trust, Frank sends Rory back to Boston to temporarily live with a grandmother the boy hasn't seen in seven years. His grandmother, Lillian, is a hard-drinking and foul-mouthed proprietor of a boarding house in Boston's racially diverse South End. She is in no way the gray-haired, cookie-baking grandmother Rory has come to expect from books and television, but a hard taskmaster who runs her house like a small fiefdom. In Boston Rory learns the truth about his ethnic heritage and meets his mother, who is now a heroin addict, and an older brother he didn't know he had. When his mother is killed by her lover, a nightclub owner and drug trafficker, and his brother goes to burn the club down, Rory tries to stop him. He fails to keep the club from burning, and in the process gets his brother killed.

At the end of the novel Rory returns to California with his father and confronts the boys who burned their house down. Rory has learned from his brother Benny and his father that he must stand up for, if not necessarily always *fight for*, who he is and what he believes. He knows he can no longer "go along to get along," and that his new knowledge of who and what is, while promising not to make his *life* any easier, will make *him* stronger.

APPROVAL PAGE

This dissertation has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
APPROVAL PAGE.....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	iii
CHAPTER	
I. ONE.....	1
II. TWO	42
III. THREE	61
IV. FOUR	80
V. FIVE	104
VI. SIX	139
VII. SEVEN	176
VIII. EIGHT	209
IX. NINE	258
X. TEN	294
XI. ELEVEN	338
XII. TWELVE	377
XIII. THIRTEEN	408
XIV. FOURTEEN	435
XV. FIFTEEN	461
XVI. SIXTEEN	476

CHAPTER ONE

My mother became famous in her hometown as the girl who married the Chinaman. It wasn't as though mixed marriages were uncommon among Cape Verdeans: after all, we are a mixed people ourselves and call each other Creoles. The oldtimers who immigrated from the Cape Verde Islands were mainly African and Portuguese, with smatterings of French and Italian and Spanish thrown in, and since we've been in this country we've married Puerto Ricans, Mexicans, Blacks, Indians and every conceivable kind of white person. But no one had ever been so creative as to marry someone Chinese, so my mother was a pioneer. It was only partially true what was said of her, though. She did marry Frank Chen of Honolulu, but he was only half Chinese; the other half was Hawaiian. But I guess Chinaman was an easier thing to remember and say than Hawaiian-Chinaman, or Hawaiian-Chinese guy. Even now, if I meet someone who knew my mother, especially someone from her generation or older, they will smile and say, "Bo e filho de mulher que casar cu homi de China!" *You are the boy whose mother married the Chinaman.*

Frank Chen was not my biological father. That honor belonged to a man my mother met when she was a professional dancer working in nightclubs. He is only important to me when I fill out insurance forms and mark "don't know"

next to questions about heart attacks, strokes and kidney disease on my father's side of the family. My mother never told anyone who he was. It wasn't important, she would say. He didn't want to have anything to do with her, or with me, so she didn't want either of us to have anything to do with him. I have never learned his name.

But because of him my mother's career with the Bobby Saunders Modern Dance Troupe ended, at least temporarily. By the time she was five months pregnant the exotic costumes she wore as an Arabian harem girl or Indian princess didn't leave her much room to hide the truth, so she quit the stage and returned to Massachusetts. After I was born she traded in her tights for tax forms and went to work for the State Revenue Office in Boston, the first real "job" she had ever had. During the week we'd be in the city, living with her parents in the South End, and on the weekends we'd go to Onset, a small town just west of the Cape Cod Canal, and stay with her Aunt Juanita and Uncle Jimmy. Onset was where her grandparents had settled after arriving from the old country, and where her parents and she had been born. Boston was where we lived, but Onset was *home*.

I was four years old when she met Frank in Onset one weekend at the Blue Flame, the hot nightclub her uncle Jimmy owned. People came to the Flame from Boston, New Bedford, Hyannis, even Providence. Legend had it that occasionally a slumming Kennedy would slip in. It was at the Blue Flame that

she had learned as a girl to dance by jitterbugging and Lindy Hopping with her uncles and older cousins. Later she had been "discovered" there by Bobby Saunders, who roamed the Cape looking for new talent. Now that her dancing career was over and she needed extra money, she came back to the Blue Flame to help out on the weekends as a bartender and waitress.

Frank was an airman stationed at Otis Air Base on the Cape. Like the other airmen, he would go to Onset or Falmouth or Hyannis on the weekends to meet the local girls. The Blue Flame was a Cape Verdean hangout, in the Cape Verdean section of town, the lower, marshy land that flooded first and drained last during Nor'easters and hurricanes. The first Cape Verdeans had been made to live there when they immigrated at the turn of the century and they remained there. White people in Onset, who lived "uptown," on higher ground overlooking Onset Bay, knew Cape Verdeans for what they were -- mulattos of Portuguese and African descent -- and, depending on how they felt about the African part, treated them accordingly. Most airmen didn't know precisely what Cape Verdeans were, but they fit them in somewhere with what they knew about people of color. Some were afraid of them; others were curious. Frank Chen and the other airmen from Hawaii, who had grown up around people of mixed race, felt right at home.

People say mother was the prettiest woman in The Blue Flame and the only one who wouldn't dance with the airmen. After she came back from the

nightclub circuit with Bobby Saunders, she wouldn't dance with anybody, period, not even the local guys who came in, men she had known all her life. She never gave anyone a reason, never said anything more than, "no," or "no thanks." She'd serve customers drinks and talk to them, but she wouldn't dance. This only made her more intriguing, especially to the airmen, and they even began to make bets about who could get her to dance. No one ever did.

Frank, who was a horrible dancer, was one of the few men who never pestered her about dancing. Maybe that was one of the things about him that appealed to her. He made small talk when she served him drinks and, after a couple of weeks, asked her out to dinner and didn't once mention a word about dancing. Four months later they were married. Everbody danced at the wedding reception, I was told later, except for them.

In a blink of an eye, Frank was no longer "Mommy's friend," but Daddy, and not too long after the wedding we were on our way to Castle Air Force Base in California, a new assignment for Frank, a new life for us. I'm sure my mother, even though she was almost thirty, old enough to know better, had some romantic notions about what kind of place it would be. My own expectations featured a tremendous fairytale castle rising up into the bright sunshine, while from behind its stone walls jet airplanes screamed into the "wild blue yonder" and out over the distant Pacific.

The base and the town we settled in surely disappointed her. Ferris,

population 10,000, sat smack in the middle of the San Joaquin Valley, farming country, a flat, dry, hot place furrowed with long rows of peach and almond orchards and onion fields stretching to the horizon from the outskirts of town. The nearest ocean was a three-hour drive away. Day in and day out, the air vibrated with the constant end-of-the-world sound of B52 bombers taking off and landing and taking off again, rehearsing for Doomsday. There had been planes at Otis, too, but since the base was 30 miles away from Onset, the nightmare noise of fighters and nuclear bombers was just a faint rumble over the hazy skies of the Cape. In Ferris the air was filled with muffled thunder all hours of the day.

We became an Air Force family. My father went to the base each day to cook in the mess hall and my mother and I kept each other company. Our first home was in base housing in an old duplex separated from another family by a double carport. Our neighbors were a family of seven from Alabama, the first red-haired people I had ever seen, and the children were always shouting and crying and breaking things. No one in the family seemed very friendly. After a month we moved to an old neighborhood in the center of town where ethnic Air Force families were encouraged to live.

We had been in Ferris about a year when, one day, out of the blue, my mother started dancing again to songs on the radio. Sometimes she even danced to the jingles on tv commercials, and before we knew it, she danced

right out of our lives. I was five years old. I don't remember much about that time, except that one day she left me with a neighbor and didn't come back. She didn't write, she didn't call. Nothing.

She had probably gone back to dancing, my father said. She had told him that her dancing days had been an exciting time, he later explained to me. She had traveled on trains, stayed in nice hotels, met new people in the clubs, made "good" money. She was probably back in that life, buying things and enjoying herself now. In one of the few pictures I have of her from her earlier dancing days she is dressed in a "native outfit," (actually a bikini festooned with leaves and palm fronds) and her partner, a tall, muscled man, is holding her up over his head on his outstretched hands. He is looking up at her with a peculiar expression probably meant to represent some kind of primitive, essential desire. That, I have come to realize, was certainly more interesting than listening to nuclear bombers take off and watching the asphalt on the roads shimmer in the heat.

We never figured out where this particular picture was taken. It could have been Detroit, San Antonio, Kansas City – any of a dozen cities. Sometimes, in my more elaborate moods, I think that she may have been pregnant with me at the time, that perhaps her belly is just a little bit swollen, that I, in there, was listening to the same music, her blood and my blood pulsing to the same beat. By the time I discovered the picture, she was long

gone. When I looked at it, and the others she had left behind, the question on my mind was not where she had been when the picture was taken, but where she was now. My father thought she had gone back to Boston, but when he called my grandmother, she always told him the same thing. She hadn't seen her.

I thought maybe she had gone to Hollywood to be a dancer in movies. I know now that the days of musicals were long gone by then, and that there generally weren't many parts for brown-skinned dancers. But when I was six years old it was a potent and satisfying delusion. After all, people were dancing across the television screen all the time. I knew that my mother was busy becoming a famous dancer and that one day she would return in a Cadillac and take us off to live in a mansion.

As I got older and the life my father made for us became more settled, the image of her coming back receded and I started adjusting myself to the increasingly likely prospect that she wouldn't return. I set my sights lower than the movies: I became a fan of music and variety shows, which always had dancers, some of them in cages suspended above the stage. Half ashamed, I looked for my mother gyrating behind bars to the growling sound of Steppenwolf and the sweet tones of the Temptations. My father never asked me what I was doing when I got close to the tv during the dance numbers, but I suppose he knew.

"Don't sit so close to the tv," he would say half-heartedly. "Bad for your eyes."

I danced, too. It was my own kind of dancing, sometimes a wild arm-thrashing, leg-swinging imitation of the women in cages on television, sometimes a dreamy, moving-through-water dance that I had never seen anyone else do. Other times I would mimic the dancers we saw in documentaries in school about African tribes or Bedouins or people in India. I didn't think about it when I did it; I just started moving. My dancing, unlike my mother's, wasn't for anyone else, although sometimes someone would be watching me and I wouldn't know it until I looked up, sweating and breathing hard. A couple of times at school I found myself starting to sway and looked over to see kids staring at me. I tried to control it, but I knew that it was something that connected me to her, wherever she was, and so it was a good thing, if not something I necessarily understood.

And my father and I did our own little dance over the years, figuring each other out. At times we were more like roommates of greatly mismatched ages than father and son. We did our separate things, knew what our responsibilities were, stayed out of each other's way. He had adopted me legally when he married my mother, so I was his and he was mine, but there was still something temporary about our relationship. I often wondered if he was just going to send me back to Massachusetts, to my grandparents or

someone else, but he never talked about that. Later I think I understood. If he was ever going to get my mother back, he needed me for her to come back to. By the time he realized that wasn't going to happen, I guess he had gotten used to me. I was his obligation; he had made a promise.

People felt sorry for us. Occasionally some of them said unkind things about my mother, as a way, I suppose, of showing how much they sympathized with us, but my father discouraged that. She must have had her reasons, he said – people didn't just go off without reasons.

He was unemotional about most things. It was the Chinese in him, he said. "Why get mad?" he would ask, if another kid called me a name or stole my lunch at school. "Getting mad doesn't change anything. If someone doesn't like you because of the color of your skin, that's their problem. Some people won't like you because of the way you comb your hair, let alone the color of your skin. Why do you want to play with someone who doesn't like you for a stupid reason like that?"

He reacted the same way when I got beaten up at school in the fourth grade. We had just moved from the center of town to a new house out near the high school, which meant changing schools and making new friends in the middle of the year. Elmer Johnson Elementary was different from my old school: it was predominantly white. Though I was sort of golden brown and my father, as far as anyone knew, was Chinese, many of my friends in my old

school had been white. I didn't think there would be a problem having white friends at Elmer Johnson. I started trying to hang around with a group of new kids, joining their games of tetherball and four-square on the playground during recess, following them home to the neighborhood after school. I should have gotten the hint that these new kids didn't want me around. They wouldn't speak to me directly and always managed to walk just a little faster than I did, so I was always lagging behind. One day they took a short cut behind the Methodist Church on the way home, climbing up over the five foot high redwood fence. I followed, scrambling over the fence behind them. When I hit the ground they jumped me, two of them holding my arms down while the third, Glenn Snider, the leader, sat on my chest and punched me in the face with each sentence he spoke. "Why're you always following us, brownie? We don't want you following us. Why don't you go back where you came from?"

I didn't fight back. It was so sudden, and they had me so completely at their mercy, that it would have been useless to struggle. Besides, the punches didn't hurt. He wasn't really hitting me hard, just hard enough so that I got the point. I wanted to be their friend, and I thought that if I just went along, they would see that I was okay, that I could take a whipping. When they were done, though, and ran off, I knew I was kidding myself. I got mad, but there was nothing I could do. I didn't say anything to my father when I went home, and he didn't seem to notice anything until the next day, when the black eye started

showing. He asked me what happened and I told him. I expected him to do something, to get angry at the other kids, maybe even get mad at me, but he didn't. He was disappointed. We had talked about prejudice before, he said, and I knew better than to think that I could make myself fit in.

He rarely lost his temper. *That* was the Hawaiian in him, he said, the aloha spirit. That's why the Islands didn't belong to the Hawaiians anymore, one of his friends in the Hawaiian Club liked to say: too many laid-back Hawaiians. He just smiled and shrugged. When something bothered him, he would get quiet and concentrate on his cooking, which was his work, first for the Air Force and then, after he retired, as half-owner and full-time cook at the China Star, the only Chinese restaurant in a thirty mile radius.

The China Star was located on Broadway Avenue in downtown Ferris, or what passed for a downtown in those days. Laid out like a piece of graph paper, with its wide streets running straight east-west and north-south, Ferris was a square-shaped town surrounded by square-shaped farms and ranches. The only curved roads marked the boundaries of two new, expensive subdivisions on the northeast and southeast town limits, far from where we lived. Downtown consisted of two parallel east-west streets on the southern edge of town, Broadway and Ferris Boulevard. South of Ferris Boulevard were the canneries, rumbling and spitting steam day and night, filling shiny cans with stewed tomatoes, tomato sauce, tomato paste, peaches in heavy syrup,

onion soup, green beans, beets and almonds. There were other businesses -- car repair shops, feed and supply stores, the farm equipment dealer -- that gave Ferris Boulevard its rough, industrial look. Stores and offices lined Broadway, to the north of Ferris Boulevard. The China Star was on the western edge of Broadway, right across from the Safeway and down from the First Valley Savings and Loan. We did a respectable business. Practically everybody likes Chinese food.

Not everybody likes Chinese people, though. In 1971, the summer I turned fourteen, most people in Ferris had a hard time distinguishing Chinese from Vietnamese. Maybe they didn't care about the distinction. I guess if you didn't know much about these things, my father looked pretty much like the guys on the news running around in black pajamas and blowing up G.I.s. We would go down to the China Star to open up for the day and find eggs splattered all over the front of the building, or our front window broken out, or human excrement smeared on the door. I would be indignant, angry, standing there trembling with hatred, looking suspiciously at every car that drove by, ready to pummel someone.

"Whoever did this is unhappy," my father would say, "not well. What can we do? Can we make them happy? Make them well?"

I would want to say that I didn't care, that I wanted to beat them up anyway, make them pay, but that was silly talk to my father. Think, he would

always say: what would violence accomplish? Could we fight everybody who didn't like us? I would stand there and stare at him, beginning to think that he was the enemy, too.

"It's not fair," I would protest.

"Get the mop and the broom," he would say.

He had joined the Air Force to fly, and mainly to fly away from Hawaii to the mainland, but when the Air Force found out that his father and grandfather had both been cooks, and that he had grown up around restaurants, they made him a cook, and promptly stationed him in Japan, Korea, the Philipines and Thailand. He could laugh about it later, but at the time, he said, he was frustrated. Mostly he had to cook *hæole* food – meatloaf and roast beef and baked chicken and chipped beef on toast, or "shit on a shingle" as the GIs called it. Every once in a while the mess hall would have a Chinese night and he would cook chow mein and fried rice and egg drop soup. It wasn't real Chinese food he had grown up eating and learning how to cook. The Air Force didn't let him cook from scratch. Chow mein from a can. It made him sad, he said.

When we moved to Ferris he only had three years left before his twenty years were up and he could retire. He thought he might like to go back to Hawaii to live, but his parents were both dead and he had been away so long that he didn't know what he would do with himself there. He didn't want to go

back to Massachusetts because of the cold weather, so he planned on staying where we were, in Central California. At that point he had no plans to open his own restaurant. He was just going to retire, at the age of 37, and see how things went for a while. But then one of his friends from the Knights of Columbus, Tony Ramirez, suggested they go into business together. My father was reluctant. The idea of being a businessman, he told me later, was something he had never considered prior to Tony's suggestion, and when he first thought about it, it was scary. Business cost money and you could lose it all. But what was he going to do? Tony asked him. What did he know how to do, but run a kitchen? If somebody else came into town and opened up a Chinese restaurant, he would never forgive himself. It would be a gold mine.

Four years later, the summer I am writing about, the China Star was a popular place to eat in Ferris, despite the occasional vandalism, but the gold hadn't started rolling in yet. If my father was disappointed, he didn't show it. He was happy to be doing what he liked and he enjoyed being his own boss. Some of the kids at school really got a kick when they found out that we ran a Chinese restaurant. They called my father Hop Sing and me Son of Hop Sing and made slant-eyed Chinese faces and bowed and said "Ah, so," and "Chop suey." I didn't even bother to tell them that Japanese, and not Chinese, were the ones who said "Ah, so." Nor did I say that I myself really wasn't Chinese but something else, something that would probably be, to their minds, more exotic.

They didn't care about being correct; they only cared about tormenting me. After a while they got tired of it and found other kids to bother -- Black kids, the children of migrant workers farm workers from Mexico. I was thankful that there were other targets of ridicule.

I was eleven the first time I saw a house burn down, and I prayed to God that the firemen wouldn't put it out, that it would burn completely, catch the houses next to it, burn the whole block, burn the town right down to the ground.

My father was driving us home from the restaurant when we saw the orange smear in the sky and heard the fire engines blatting and wailing, the angry, steady rumble reaching across town. I turned toward my opened window, thinking I would catch the smell of the fire, but instead smelled the stale smoke of the cigarettes mashed in the ashtray.

"Let's go see where it is," my father said.

"Okay."

My father feared and respected fire. He was always scolding the workers at the restaurant about leaving things burning. Restaurants caught on fire all the time because of careless workers, he would tell them. Fires didn't just happen. One mistake and a fire could change everything.

The street was cordoned off a block from the fire by police cars with lights lazily flashing and cops waving down cars with flashlights. There was a line of

cars ahead of us, silhouettes of heads and the glow of taillights. It was a silky night, with a soft steady wind in the leaves, maybe seventy degrees. We sat there in the idling car, and then my father pulled over to the curb and cut the engine and set the emergency brake.

He lit a cigarette, a tiny flare in the dark next to me, quickly ignited, quickly gone. We watched the fire from where we sat. The smells of my father's car seemed to penetrate so deeply into me, that I felt that I must smell like that always. Garlic, sweat, gasoline, ashes.

I listened to the ticking engine and the idling cars around us, the scratch of the police radios. voices amplified over speakers, the growling of the pump engines, the throaty roar of the fire.

"Come on," my father said. "Let's get closer."

We got out and made our way down the sidewalk.

The air shifted briefly and the smell of the trees and cut grass in the back of my throat became instead a bitter taste, the smell of summer overcome by something dark and powerful. My father, a few steps ahead of me, turned and saw that I had stopped.

"You change your mind?" he asked.

I hadn't realized I had stopped. The smell had made me pull up short. I shook my head and caught up to him.

"The wind is dangerous," he said. "The fire could go anywhere with the

wind."

"It can't get our house, can it?" I asked.

"No, we're too far away."

I could imagine the wind rising up, becoming a storm, whipping the trees and scattering the embers of the fire across town, settling down bullets of fire on our house. But no. My father had said that wouldn't happen. Some of my friends disputed their fathers. If they didn't like what their fathers said, they would go ask their mothers. I didn't have that option. That kind of thing was a white thing, anyway, my father told me. Chinese children didn't question their parents, and certainly not their fathers. The most important thing was to respect your parents. Respect was the foundation of the family.

We found an open place at the police tape. The wind shifted again and the biting smoke grabbed my throat and stung my eyes. I felt the urge to run, to get to fresh air, but my father stood where he was, pulling the collar of his tee shirt up over his nose. I did the same.

The wind shifted back. Smoke that had hung low in front of the house was now peeled away, like a sheet lifted, and the fire returned with a glorious resurgence of color, like a magician's trick, a presentation. People murmured around us in the dark.

Someone came up from behind and stood on the other side of my father.

"Hey, Chen," the man said.

"Hey, how's it going?" my father said.

"Whole lot better than it is for those folks, I'll tell you."

"Yeah, it's too bad."

I glanced at the man but didn't recognize him. Plenty of people in town knew my father from The China Star and I knew many of them because I helped out in the restaurant and did my homework in the back after school. This man wasn't familiar.

"Nigger family," the man said casually. "Air Force, like us."

I turned to my father to see his reaction. Nigger was a word he never used and told me never to say, not even in repeating what other people said. "We don't want to be called Chink or Slant Eyes," he used to say. "So we don't call other people names." He looked down at me and very subtly shook his head.

"It's a shame," he said. Although he was adamant about things he wouldn't allow in our house, he also didn't like to confront people. It wasn't his job to lecture anyone, he would say, especially adults. If a customer at the restaurant was being obnoxious, he would go out of his way to try and make things work out. When it came right down to it, he often told me, you could only make an impression on people by the way you acted, not through the things you said.

"Probably did it themselves," the man said. "Look what they did last year after King got shot."

"These are good people. My boy knows their sons."

The house was now completely aflame, a liquid, roiling orange. The man spoke again, but I could only hear the music of the fire swarming around me. I followed the flames as they danced up from the frame of the building, saw smoke rolling away in great dark fists, saw bits and scraps of ash and char lifting into the sky. The firemen were arcing streams of water toward the fire, but they couldn't put it out. They could not stop it. No one could. I felt myself trembling.

A piece of burning paper fluttered up on the turbulence and danced against the dark air. I imagined the sparks finding their way to the houses of the people who hated us, settling down on the roofs of the secret cowards who broke our windows, punishing them in ways that I couldn't, avenging us.

The house burned to cinders that smoked for three days. I rode by it each day after school on my bike and stared at the smoldering char and listened to the black and grey ash pop. The first day I was among a group of kids that congregated just beyond the yellow police tape, speculating about the fire, trying to figure out just what was this or that twisted lump. By the second day the novelty had worn off for most of the others, and only a handful of us came to sniff the heavy smell of disaster. The third day I was alone. Threads of occasional smoke wafted from the debris. The man who lived next door pulled out his hose and sprayed down the still smoking sections closest to his house,

releasing a faint hiss. The day after that the bulldozers came, and then there was nothing to see. I stopped going, and for the first time that week I made it to the restaurant on time.

Besides La Nita, the Mexican restaurant on Third Street, the China Star was the only "exotic" place to eat in Ferris. It was a small restaurant, three booths and four tables, but it kept busy. During the day we served the local business people – a couple of lawyers and people from the Savings and Loan and the folks who owned the other shops along Main Street – and at night and on the weekends we got airmen and officers and their families and other working people in town.

My duties at the restaurant were things a boy could do – sweep, mop, wash dishes and help Delores bus tables. Delores, our full-time waitress, had come to us from The Rendezvous, a truck stop out by the new Highway 99 bypass that looped south of town. The Rendezvous was a rowdy, smoke-filled place where the truckers and late night crowd were always flirting with the waitresses. Delores said she had left The Rendezvous to get away from the constant fondling and lewd jokes from the customers. She was one more ass-grabbing away from throwing hot coffee in someone's face and she didn't want the trouble that would come with that. She was a tall, freckle-faced redhead who looked completely out of place in a Chinese restaurant, but she worked hard and the customers liked her. The only problem was that she had learned

at The Rendezvous to turn everything on the menu into a series of initials which she shouted through the order bay to my father. My father tried for years to get her to call our meals by their proper names, but if someone ordered Chicken Chow Yuk it became a "CCK!"

During the school year I would ride my bike home and do the hardest part of my homework, then pedal down to the restaurant in time to help with dinner. If it was a slow night and I still had some schoolwork to do, I would work at a table back in the storeroom, immersed in the aromas of ginger and garlic, cabbage and sesame oil. Then, after dinner, when the floor was mopped, the dishes all dried and the garbage taken out, my father would put my bike in the back seat of his VW Bug and we would drive home. On the slow days, I would leave early and ride my bike home in the dark, handlebars and rear fenders sparkling with reflectors and lights. The dimes and nickels Delores shared with me from her tips clicked gently in my pockets and I could smell on my clothes, lost in the smell of food and spices, the faint trace of the heavy perfume she wore.

When I had told my father, back when I was in the fifth grade, that I thought I wanted to be a doctor when I grew up, he started buying me bi-weekly magazines titled The Story of Life that featured articles about diseases and operations and the functions of organs. Since some of those organs were reproductive, I learned about the technical aspects of sex while my classmates

were still debating exactly where on a woman's body babies came from. From simultaneously titillating and troubling diagrams and detailed drawings, I learned the names and purposes of things I hadn't even known existed, and understood why and how sex happened. None of this prepared me for the anxiety of the real thing. My chest contracted when I saw Karen Mazzetti's budding breasts or Sherilyn Randolph's friendly round bottom. My stomach twisted and churned when I accidentally bumped into Lori Andora and felt her softness against my arm. The older sisters of friends became mysterious goddesses whose curves and tapered legs struck me dumb. According to the science magazines, these feelings were natural, they were even "good," but why, then, was everything so tinged with guilt? Why, when Robert Lloyd let me in on *the big secret*, masturbation, were my feelings so complicated?

I treated the sex thing as I had assumed it should be -- with silence. The priests at St. Anthony's made sure of that, probing us in the confessional. They asked about things that perhaps we were a little embarrassed to admit, things about our bodies, things that we might have done to our bodies. Since sex was something that didn't seem like it was going away, and since I thought the prospect of confessing weekly to masturbation would be humiliating (and time consuming -- ten Hail Marys, ten Our Fathers, for each offense), I just stopped talking about it. I didn't tell either the priests or my friends anything. I churned and fidgeted, and though I figured the priests probably knew I was holding out,

didn't break my silence.

I was afraid that it wasn't only the priests who knew what was going on inside me. Other adults had to know as well. I was certain the young airmen who came in to the restaurant, the guys who were always flirting with Delores or trying to cop feels off their dates, knew just by looking at me. Other boys had to be going through this turmoil, the temptation, the temporary gratification and guilt, but no one said anything. The whole topic of masturbation was spoken of with so much ridicule and contempt you would think that it didn't exist among eighth grade boys, although, according to my bi-weekly magazines, it was a near essential activity and "nothing about which the adolescent should be ashamed."

I saw kids at school that I thought were like me, but I just couldn't say anything to them. It would be a big gamble to think that they would admit to the one thing apparently universally scorned. The risk of being found out didn't seem worth it. Better to die painfully than be publicly proclaimed a masturbator. Things were already hard enough because of the color of my skin and my last name. Worse than being called brownie or Chink would be to have masturbator added to the slurs. But I had to talk to someone like me or I would go crazy. Then the new family moved in across the street.

It was a spring afternoon, a light homework day, not time yet to go to the restaurant. I watched them through a hole in the gate at the side of our house

as the moving van unloaded their furniture. A white Air Force family – crewcut father, chain-smoking mother, two boys, one of them my age. I wondered if the other boy was like me, if he had these same feelings about sex, if he knew the things I knew, or maybe knew more. I got butterflies in my stomach and along with them, a squeezing knot of shame. I wanted to go over and meet him, but I stayed behind the fence.

The other kid made the first move. Since I rode my bike to school and he took the bus, we didn't meet at the bus stop. And though I saw him at school, we didn't have any classes together, so there was no real chance to talk, just passings in the halls. Then we started waving to each other and saying "hey" across the street. Finally, one day, the kid crossed the street to our driveway just as I was coasting up on my bike. He ambled over, his hands shoved deep in his pockets, his long hair swinging against the sides of his face.

"Hey," he said.

"Hey."

"My name's Ryan Azio."

"My name's Rory, Rory Chen."

A breeze blew from behind him, carrying his stale smell to me. A lot of kids in school smelled like that, kids who didn't bathe regularly. Their clothes smelled old and used.

"Rory," he said. "Cool. I never heard that name before."

"It's unique," I said. "That's what teachers always like to tell me."

"You like school?"

"It's okay."

When my father's friends asked me that question, the answer, of course, was an enthusiastic yes. With my peers, I had to be more subdued. I liked school, but I had to hide it from other kids. It wasn't cool.

"Sometimes it's a pain in the ass," Ryan said. "Sometimes it's just a lot of shit they give you to keep busy."

"I'm going to be a doctor," I said, which usually was a sufficient answer for anyone.

"So why do you have to learn history?" Ryan asked. "Or geography?"

"You just need to know those things," I said. "I like history and geography. Battles and stuff, explorers."

He made a face and I felt as though I had failed a test. He started to speak again but stopped. A B-52 was taking off from the base, its eight engines screaming, the sound an endless explosion. We turned and watched over the treetops and houses as the long, thin plane lifted into the air trailing dark ribbons of exhaust. My father said the planes carried bombs that each weighed more than our Volkswagen. Other people said that these bombers were only on training missions and never carried live bombs, but the word around town was that there were nuclear bombs on the base and that in case

of World War III, they would be loaded onto the planes and flown to Russia. The Russians, in return, would fire off missiles at the base and in about thirty minutes we would all be incinerated. I had a recurring dream that it was happening and that we were waiting, stunned and unbelieving, for the missiles to arrive.

Ryan turned back to me and tucked his hair behind his ears. "One of them crashed up in Alaska once," he said over the roar of the jet. "It was far out. The guys got out okay, but the plane smashed into the side of this mountain and burned up half the forest. The mountain burned for days." He gestured with his hands as he spoke, one hand a plane, the other a mountain, and mimicked the sound of the explosion.

"None of ours have ever crashed," I said, almost wishing one had.

Ryan looked at me as though he pitied me greatly.

"I want to show you something," Ryan said.

"Yeah? What is it?"

"It's a secret. Come on. You like secrets, don't you?"

"Sure."

"So come on."

I put my bike up on its kickstand and followed Ryan over to his house and into the garage.

Ryan turned on the garage light and searched behind some boxes. I felt

lightheaded. He was going to pull out some kind of sex contraband. Pictures. Pictures of naked women. Boxes tumbled to the garage floor. He came back seconds later and held out a square block of multicolored swirls and blotches. The bottom of the block was flat, but on top it was lumpy and irregular. Ryan pointed at various places on the block.

"Dinosaurs, cars, Jap soldiers, American soldiers," he said.

I touched the block. I didn't understand.

"I melted them yesterday," Ryan said. "I used gasoline." He looked at me. "I like to burn things. Do you like to burn things?"

I touched the block again, stared at the swirling colors. I saw the burning house again, felt a shiver of excitement like I had that night two years ago. Ryan's eyes bore into me.

"I have a whole set of civil war soldiers," I said, and could already seem them melting, burning, becoming transformed.

"It's the coolest thing," Ryan said. "We burned things all the time up in Alaska. It's fucking great."

"I saw a house burn down two years ago," I said.

He just smiled back at me.

When I went home a few minutes later, I lay down with my head facing the foot of my bed, face down, my chin hanging over the edge. I stared at the orange and red shag carpet, made my eyes go out of focus so that the tendrils

looked like vague flames. I closed my eyes. I had found a Playboy in the dumpster behind the China Star earlier in the year. It was on top of a cardboard box, not down in the garbage or anything, sitting there like a present. I fished it out and kept it in the storage room for a couple of days, studying Miss February, until I got nervous about someone finding it and threw it back into the dumpster. I thought about her now, tried to see her breasts, but all I could see were her eyes, her brown sad eyes. I sat up and stared at my closet door. I had thought that this was what Ryan was going to show me or tell me about -- something about sex. I was disappointed that he hadn't, but relieved, too. Burning things seemed a lot less complicated, and it probably wasn't as big a sin as the sex stuff. I got up off the bed and opened the closet door and began cataloging my toys.

"Okay," Ryan said. "This will be alright, except for the wood. It burns too long."

He finished inspecting the contents of the shoebox I had brought over -- old plastic dinosaurs, some Lincoln Logs and a broken batmobile, things I hadn't played with in years -- and stood. The box was on the garage floor between us and next to it were a metal gasoline can, an empty plastic dish soap bottle and a tin funnel. I was jumpy and nervous, straining to identify any sound I heard outside. No one was home in Ryan's house, but I still thought I

heard someone in there. I had no idea what was going to happen, but I knew it had to be good.

"First things first," Ryan said. He unscrewed the tops of the plastic bottle and the gasoline can. "You gotta put the gas in here so you don't slosh it all over everything. Here, hold this." He put the funnel in the mouth of the plastic bottle and handed the bottle to me. "We can't waste any, so hold it tight."

I got down on my knees and held the bottle in one hand and secured the funnel with the other. Ryan kneeled beside me and lifted the gasoline can. The strong, rich odor of gas filled my sinuses as he carefully tilted the can and filled the funnel halfway.

"Do you use regular or hit-test?" I joked.

He laughed. "This is for the lawnmower so we only get regular." He slowly filled the bottle, then put the can down. "But, hey -- we use hi-test in the car. We could siphon some out. I wonder if that would burn better?"

"Probably," I said, although I didn't know. "Why else would they call it hi-test?"

"Yeah." He tightened the cap back on the gas can and carried it and the funnel a few feet away. "Okay," he said, coming back to me. "Now we have to put the nozzle back on the other bottle." I screwed the plastic nozzle back on and handed it to him. "Alright," he said, hefting the bottle. He grinned. "Rock and roll."

We crammed the plastic dinosaurs into the seats of the batmobile and placed some on the hood and trunk, while Ryan made up an inane story explaining why they were there. Then he carefully and judiciously squirted gas on the little scene and stepped back.

"Is that enough gas?" I asked.

"Yeah. It doesn't take very much. Here." He handed me a book of matches. "Just light a match and drop it on top. That's all it takes."

I didn't know what to expect. A slowly kindling fire? A fireball? I stepped toward the toys and held a match ready.

"Bombs away," Ryan said.

I lit the match and dropped it on the gasoline-slick hood of the batmobile and pulled my hand back just as the flames erupted with a gentle-sounding poof. The flames rose two feet high. Ryan got down on his knees, leaning over so that he was on eye level with the burning toys. I joined him and watched the plastic dinosaurs melt and run off the hood of the car. The car itself began to crumple, like a slow-motion accident, curling in on itself, spinning little bits of charred plastic into the air.

"See that?" he said, pointing to the center of the fire. "The blue? See it?" I followed his finger and saw that the fire in the center was indeed blue. "That's where it's hottest."

I leaned close so that I could feel the warmth on my face. "Looks like

Batman's gonna need a new car," I said, mimicing the voice of the narrator on the Batman show and laughing. Ryan laughed with me. Just a little bit of gas and a match. That was all it took and look what I had done. It felt good.

Over the next two weeks we burned everything we could get our hands on. My Civil War soldiers went first, then my cowboys and Indians. Then came plastic cars from Ryan's old, broken racetrack, then the racetrack itself. These small toys soon bored us, and we each sacrificed a G.I. Joe. Ryan went first, a fierce uncompromising look in his eyes as he doused his own figurine with gasoline and tossed a match on it without a second's apparent thought. The next day it was my turn. I was torn between loyalty to my G.I. Joe and my desire to see something burn, but when I remembered Ryan's unhesitating act, I knew that I would have to follow suit. I let Ryan pour the gasoline from the old dishsoap bottle, but I lit the match myself. I recited a statement explaining why Joe was being executed, then let him have it. He burned standing up and we watched as he slowly melted down into himself and fell over. The garage filled with swirling bits of black plastic. Spiders of red and orange crawled across the floor at the edges of the fire. The flames sputtered out in an ugly pool of discolored plastic.

On Saturday afternoons I rode my bike to St. Anthony's for confession. My

father didn't receive communion, so he never went to confession, even though he went to Mass every Sunday. I didn't understand, but I didn't spend much time trying to figure it out.

I would kneel in the confessional and tell the priest my edited list of petty sins: cussing, not obeying my father, wishing certain kids would break their legs. Confession wasn't difficult because the list didn't change and I didn't have to think much. Sometimes I felt like Tom Anderson, a kid I knew from Little League, who once told me he couldn't wait for high school so he'd really have something to confess.

I agonized over telling the priests about the burning. I didn't think there was anything specifically sinful about burning toy soldiers, but I would never tell my father about the burning, and Father Mahoney had once said that if it was something you didn't want your parents to know about, then it was a good bet it was a sin.

Still, I didn't confess about the fires. I was not alone among kids who felt that the priests weren't totally to be trusted. They said they kept confessions secret, but you never could tell. Better safe than sorry. Besides, you confessed things you felt bad about. And the feelings I felt each night as I lay in bed thinking about the next day's burning were not bad feelings at all.

Eventually we had to slow down. We ran out of toys. And after my father gave me a strange look when I asked for money to buy a second G.I. Joe in as

many weeks, I realized it was best not to push my luck. I agreed with Ryan that we should only burn things once a week.

"And not the same day every week, either," Ryan said. "We don't want to get into a pattern. That's how you get caught."

It sounded like a line from an old gangster movie that they showed on tv on Saturday afternoons, but I agreed that it made sense.

The puzzling thing about Ryan was that he always made a lot of sense when we were at his home talking about things like setting fires and smoking cigarettes, but in school he wasn't a good student like I was. I would often look out the window of one of my classrooms and see him outside on his way to the office. When I would ask him later about what had happened, Ryan would give the same kind of answer. "Just some stupid chickenshit." He said similar things about homework. "Homework is stupid. It's just stuff they do to keep you busy," he would say. "I've got more important things to do."

Ryan's attitude about homework was hard on me. I knew that while I was struggling with math or looking up things for my geography worksheets, he was out there, waiting for me so we could do things, biding his time before we could set something on fire. At first he would come over after school and talk to me while I tried to do my homework, but it was hard to get my assignments done that way. My father checked my homework every night after he got back from the restaurant and I didn't want to chance it.

If my father ever found out about what kind of student Ryan was, that would be the end of hanging around with him. With my father, schoolwork was everything. He would even let me miss Mass if I had to get a project done for school, especially since I had told him that I wanted to be a doctor.

As the days got longer and homework got shorter (it seemed teachers were getting as tired as we were) I found myself with more time in the afternoon. Since we'd had to slow down on the burning and Ryan didn't have a bike to ride into town, I decided to take Ryan on expeditions out on the canals beyond the subdivision.

Only a dozen inches of rain fell on Central California in a good year, so irrigation canals were necessary for farming. Although I heard about the canals from kids in school who swam in them, it was almost three years before I saw one, after my father and I moved out to our new neighborhood. I discovered that the biggest canal in the county, forty feet wide and ten feet deep, cut through the countryside just a quarter mile away, out beyond the fields at the edge of our subdivision. When it had come time to stop burning things and we needed something new to do, I was ready.

Since the Azios had moved to Ferris from Alaska, open countryside was nothing new to Ryan. Canals were, though, and I felt sure he'd be impressed when he saw the big one. On a midweek afternoon in May, after I finished my homework, I went over to the Azios' garage, where I knew Ryan would be

waiting for me. I took my BB gun and my movie camera with me. Mr. Azio had turned part of the garage into what he called a music room for Ryan and his older brother Nick, who was hardly ever around. The music room was just a table for a record player and a couple of old stuffed chairs in the corner of the garage opposite the washer and dryer. Mrs. Azio had complained about Nick and Ryan listening to the Rolling Stones and Black Sabbath too loud in his room.

The record player's puny speakers, thumping and rattling at the highest possible volume, distorted Jimi Hendrix almost beyond recognition. Ryan told me that this kind of music had to be played loud to appreciate it. The effect was both annoying and appealing, like a goofy girl who had big breasts. It suggested to me things I had never done, things I would never do, wild things.

Ryan was sitting in the rattiest of the easy chairs, pretending to play the drums. His hair flipped around his face as he thrashed his arms. With the confused sounds whumping and thudding out of the speakers, it was hard to tell what was bass and what drums, but Ryan was flailing enough to account for every low rumble and thump. Ryan was the only kid I knew who played the air drums. All the other kids I knew pretended they were guitar players.

The song ended and Ryan completed his pantomime, throwing his pretend drumsticks out into the imaginary audience and holding his arms out

to acknowledge their applause. Finally, he made eye contact with me.

"What's that for?" Ryan asked, pointing at the camera

I ignored the question. "I want to show you something," I said, smiling. It was now my turn.

Ryan didn't ask for any explanations. He switched off the record player without bothering to remove the tone arm from the record. The next song moaned and growled as the needle ground to a stop in the vinyl.

"Show me," he said.

I led him down the street to where the subdivision broke off in a half-completed block that adjoined a scrabbly field of tumbleweed and haphazard garbage. At the other side of the field, fifty yards away, a barbed-wire fence enclosed the narrow dogleg portion of an almond orchard that stretched out along the canal bank. You had to go through this part of the orchard to get to the canal.

Ryan looked over at me to see if this was it, but didn't say anything. I kept going. The barbed-wire fence was meant as a long-distance discouragement rather than an effective barrier, because when you got right up to it you could see that it was sagging and rusted and broken in places. An old metal NO TRESPASSING sign that had hung from one of the wires had been peppered with BB's and finally torn down and stomped and kicked into the field. I hadn't done that but I had seen it done. We trudged through the sandy soil under the

pale green almond leaves and came to the far end, another pitiful fence and the earthen embankment that rose up beyond it.

"Up there," I said.

We ducked under the fence and scrambled up the embankment to the hardpan road on top. Ryan gaped at the wide, flat, seemingly motionless waters of the canal, blackish green in the sun.

"This is it," I said.

Ryan turned to me with a strange grin.

"A fake river!" he said.

I picked up a dirt clod and whipped it sidearm across the canal. A trio of bullfrogs on the other bank croaked and flung themselves into the water, creating ripples that we watched roll slowly toward us. Upstream, a redwing blackbird clung to a cattail and bobbed in the breeze. I threw another clod and the blackbird screeched and lazily flew further upstream.

"This is cool," Ryan said. "Where does it go?"

"Come on," I said.

He followed me upstream to the old, broken wooden bridge that crossed the canal and led to the sewage treatment plant on the other side, then to the deserted farm with its cavernous, fractured barn. Farther on was the spillway, where the water fell in a glassy green sheet from behind raised partitions. As I led the way I felt like I was in a movie about an explorer. Although when I

thought about it I realized that I was in the position of the native guide, the African or Indian guy who lead the way, who was a servant or slave to the explorer and usually got eaten, trampled or drowned. I ignored the images. I was in my own movie.

When my father had bought the movie camera two years ago, he hadn't said anything about it being mine, but since I used it the most, I now kept it in my bureau. My father had used it a couple of times at the restaurant and last year during baseball season, but I was the one who made movies with it, usually stop action pieces starring little misshapen clay creatures I had made, or my G.I. Joes. I would take it to school on special days and would enjoy the celebrity it gave me. Kids who normally wouldn't give me the time of day would let me direct their actions for the camera. I could tell them to stand here, make faces, walk over there, sit down. Before Ryan showed up I didn't take the camera with me on trips to the canal because I couldn't hunt and shoot film at the same time. But with Ryan we would be able to do both.

I started filming once we got to the spillway. Ryan was at first wasteful with the BBs, shooting at anything that caught his fancy, tin cans floating in the water, pieces of glass on the road, dirt clods, bubbles at the water's edge that suggested frogs hiding beneath the surface. Birds retreated before us -- blackbirds, swallows, meadowlarks -- like an army reluctantly conceding territory in the face of a relentless advance. They were never close enough for

Ryan to hit them, but he persisted in firing long futile shots after them.

We had walked about a mile in the dusty heat when we came to an old cottonwood tree that grew out over the road. Two blackbirds were perched on one of the lower branches. As we approached, the birds took turns flying away and returning to the same branch. Ryan kept lofting shots at them until he realized that they were guarding the lumpy thing between them on the branch. Ryan lowered the rifle and looked at me.

"A nest," he said. "Are you filming?"

I hadn't been running the camera for a while, but now I looked through the viewfinder and followed closely as Ryan approached the tree, gun held ready.

He fired. The first blackbird, the male, fell dead to the road like a stone, unbloodied. The female came down screeching and fluttering in a shower of feathers. Ryan tried to finish the bird off from a distance of about ten feet, but he missed twice and then had to reload. The blackbird hopped in a circle, trailing a wing, then stopped, facing Ryan, and bobbed up and down, opening its mouth wide. Ryan kept trying to kill it from where he stood. Through the camera I could only see the bird and the impact of the BBs in the dust around it. Finally, the barrel of the rifle poked into the frame and the final shot knocked the bird over.

I stopped filming and looked at the dead birds. Ryan kicked them into the canal and shot at the bodies as they floated downstream, the bbs kicking up

splashes around them.

The babies were still chirping in the nest. I couldn't tell how many there were. We were standing in the cool shade, but I felt hot and uneasy.

"What are we going to do about the babies?" I asked.

Ryan answered by firing up into the nest.

"No!" I reached for the rifle but he stepped away from me.

"What are you going to do, just leave them there to die of starvation?" he asked.

He jacked the Winchester's lever feverishly and shot as fast as he could. The nest shook and jiggled. I saw an occasional BB miss its mark, a shot that ripped through leaves above or hurtled off into the flat blue sky. The on-target shots made cracking sounds. The chirping continued.

"You getting this?" Ryan asked. "You want to shoot some?"

"No."

He reloaded a second time, then laid the rifle on the road and clambered down the embankment to try to climb the tree. It was too wide for him to get his arms around and the first branch was too high off the ground, so he gave up and searched around for a stick. He found an rusted metal pole and climbed back up to the road. First he tried jabbing at the nest, but his aim wasn't steady enough, so he swiped at it. He got the nest on the third swing and it hit the ground upside down. My stomach felt hollowed out.

And I don't know why, but I began filming again. Ryan grabbed the rifle and used the barrel to flip the nest over. Four scrawny chicks peeped and chirped, stumbling over each other, puny wings flapping. A fifth lay twisted and motionless. I filmed and watched, unable to stop, as Ryan killed them all. One BB apiece was enough, but he kept shooting until he had turned them into what looked like pieces of torn wet cloth. Then he kicked them and the nest into the water and threw the pole in after them.

The sun was low in the sky behind Ryan now and shone so bright through the camera that all I could see was Ryan's dark outline. I stopped filming.

Ryan was clutching the rifle and breathing hard.

"It's getting late," he said. "My father said be home for dinner on time tonight or else. Here."

He held the rifle out to me, but I refused to take it and made him carry it back home. He shot off all the BBs as we walked and we didn't speak except to say goodbye when we parted in front of our houses. I went in and put the rifle in the back of my closet, where I couldn't see it anymore. I got cleaned up and rode down to the China Star. It was almost time for dinner.

CHAPTER TWO

On the first day of my summer vacation, my father and I sat in the warm morning sun in the corner of the base hospital waiting room, surrounded by wives and children -- dependents. I sat in a kind of stupor, made drowsy by the sun, barely attentive to the hospital sounds of intercoms and gurneys, the smells of disinfectant and alcohol. I knew my father felt funny being the only man there. He didn't like hospitals; they were places where people died, he said. He probably wanted to tell people that he wasn't sick, that he was just here for a physical. But, since he couldn't do that, he got up and walked around, trying his best to look vigorous and healthy.

The checkup was for a life insurance policy, which was Tony's idea. Tony Ramirez, my father would admit, was the brains behind the China Star. It wasn't that Tony was all that smart, but that he knew the right people, the zoning and ordinance people, the assessors, the bankers. He and my father had started the restaurant with money they both had saved, but now they wanted to expand and open a second restaurant in Barton, the next town over, and they were going to have to take out a bank loan. Tony said that it would score some points with the bankers if they both had life insurance naming the business as their beneficiaries. That way, the bank would be assured of getting

its money if something happened to either of them.

The insurance forms had lain around the house for weeks. My father told Tony he would get around to them and the physical when he had time. Meanwhile, there was cooking to be done. Finally the time caught up with him. The bankers were bringing the loan forms to the restaurant today around lunchtime. So my father had gotten up early and filled in the information, sitting at the kitchen table wearing his black-framed reading glasses and using one of the endless U.S. Government issue ballpoint pens we had around. He had me double-check to make sure he hadn't made any mistakes. Since I did well in school, he always consulted me when something had to be written or forms had to be filled out, especially for the restaurant.

On the drive to the hospital he told me that in all the time he was in the Air Force, he had probably gone to the hospital only three or four times. He rarely got sick and when he did it was usually just a cold or something. He avoided doctors, especially Air Force doctors, as much as possible. As far as he was concerned, you were rolling the dice each time you went to see them. If they were any good, they wouldn't be in the Air Force.

Over the years he had told me the story of how he had joined the Air Force. It was one of his favorite stories, intended to illustrate for me how life was uncertain and plans could always be disrupted. He had enlisted the day after graduating from high school in 1948. He and his three best friends, still

hungover from drinking the night before, dared each other to go into the Armed Services recruiting office in downtown Honolulu to enlist. For the longest time they had talked about getting into one of the services, about getting away from Hawaii to see the world -- the Philippines, the mainland, maybe even Europe. They indulged their wildest he-man fantasies and talked about joining the Marines, the warriors, the guys who hit the beaches. Over the years, especially during the war, they had met plenty of servicemen, and it was the Marines they remembered the most, the heroes. They were the kind of guys you could imagine yourself being -- brave, tough, invincible.

All that talking must have convinced the other guys, because when they went down to the recruiting station, my father was the only one to join the Air Force. His buddies Motormouth, Donny Reponte and Beanhead all signed up with the Marines. For a few days afterward they teased him about chickening out, but the teasing didn't last. Maybe they realized that he had made the smart choice. After they all shipped out for boot camp, my father never saw them again. Donny was killed in Korea. Motormouth was an MIA in Vietnam. Beanhead served eight years and got out in North Carolina and disappeared on the mainland. My father did his twenty years and here he was.

One of the nurses was calling out something. I looked up from my drowsing toward the desk where she sat, looking down at some papers. She raised her head and called "Johnson?"

A young Asian woman with two small children sitting across from where my father was pacing suddenly sat up as if she had been slapped.

"Yes!" she said. "Yes, me Johnson!"

She hurried over to the nurse's table, holding one of her children on her hip and pulling the other. She talked to the nurse for a few seconds in a low voice. The nurse nodded at her, scribbled something on a form, smiled at the children. The woman walked off quickly down the hall to the right. The nurse watched them, then made a sour face. She turned and our eyes met and her expression turned into a broad, cold smile. I blinked back at her, then looked over at my father. He glanced at the nurse and raised his eyebrows, then came back over and sat down next to me.

"Filipino girl," he said.

"Like Mama Reponte," I said.

Mama Reponte was the grandmother of Donny Reponte, my father's high school friend. She was like a grandmother to all Donny's friends, an old woman who remembered life in the islands before they became a territory, back when there were still Hawaiian kings. Even though he didn't talk much about Hawaii, my father sometimes would tell stories about her from when he was growing up. I felt I knew her as though she were part of our family.

"Yeah." He lifted his hand and gestured in the direction the Filipino woman had gone. "Married a *haole* guy in the service: Johnson. Lot of white people

don't like that."

Sometimes he would say something provocative like that and then wait for me to question him. You never learned if you didn't ask questions, he liked to say.

"How come?" I asked.

"Some people don't like people to mix. Haoles, especially. but other kinds, too. Chinese. Japanese. Everybody thinks that they are special, different from everybody else, so they don't like people mixing. To your face they pretend everything's okay, but then you turn your back and they do like that nurse. Maybe someday everybody will have the Hawaiian attitude -- 'hey, no worry!'"

I looked at the nurse again. She looked pleasant enough as she sat there and leafed through forms on her desk. But I had seen the ugly face she had made.

"Did people say stuff about you and my mother when you got married?"

"Nobody said anything to me. Usually they don't, not right to your face. We were both brown. But somebody probably said something. It's just the way people are."

I thought about the girls I had liked in school the past year. Most of them were white. There was one Mexican girl I danced with a few times at our graduation party, but that was just a dance. To us kids it didn't mean anything.

I wasn't very interested in Mexican girls or black girls. They weren't the ones I was supposed to want, even though I, too, was brown. The girls I saw everywhere on tv, in magazines and movies, all the prettiest ones, were white. Like Miss February. These were the girls I saw everywhere I turned.

"Mama Reponte said that one day the brown man would rule the world," my father said. He rolled the insurance papers into a tight cylinder. "Maybe if everybody mixed together, that would be true."

He told me that when he and his friends asked Mama Reponte what they should do after graduation, she was uncharacteristically noncommittal. "Don't matter none," she told them. They were surprised, because Mama Reponte always given them advice before and it was usually specific. "That girl no good for you," she would say. "Better watch out come Saturday night." But on which service they should join, or whether they should join at all, she couldn't or wouldn't tell them anything. Years later my father said he still didn't know what her refusal to be specific about their futures meant.

The way he described her, Mama Reponte was a tiny woman, barely four feet tall. Ever since my father could remember, she was old, her face impossibly wrinkled, the skin hanging loose on her elbows and neck. She had no teeth and seldom wore the bad pair of dentures a Navy dentist had made for her. A shapeless mumu always hung from her pointed shoulders and whipped around her when the wind blew. She would peer at you with yellowed, cloudy

eyes and see into your future.

People came to her all the time to ask for advice, my father said, making the pilgrimage down the well-packed path to her quonset hut near Diamond Head. From a distance you couldn't tell it was a quonset hut because it had been thatched over by her sons. He said she wanted to feel like she was living in an old style house. People would ask her questions and she would stare at them for a few seconds, maybe ask some questions of her own, then give an answer. "No kill pig yet." "You want girl baby, wait for full moon." She knew things, and what she knew was always true.

My father always told me more about Mama Reponte than he did about his own mother and father. While we waited for the nurse to call him I got him to tell me more stories about her. He said when he was young he was afraid of her. Her eyes and skin scared him. She looked to him like an old lizard, especially when she would smoke those nasty little Filipino cigars and wet her lips with her tongue. Some of the people, mostly those who went to the Baptist Church, said she was a witch. The Catholics said she was a saint, that she was a good Catholic. To the Baptists that didn't make any difference.

But when he started hanging around with Donny he had to get used to Mama Reponte, because Donny lived with her most of the time. The first time she spoke directly to him she was sitting on the porch in her rocking chair and he was waiting on the steps for Donny to come out of the house.

"Hey, boy," she said. "Got light?" My father spoke in a quick, high voice, like a bird's, forgetting about the nurse and the other patients.

He said Mama was dangling one of her cigars out of the corner of her mouth. He was only thirteen, like me, but he and the other boys had been smoking for two summers. He approached her and held out the box of matches when she asked him to.

I knew the rest of the story. He struck a match when she asked him and held it in front of her, hoping that she wouldn't touch him. She cupped her hands around his while she sucked on the cigar, then grabbed his wrist when the cigar was lit. She turned his hand and looked at the second knuckle of his thumb, which stuck out farther than it should have. He had broken it the year before playing football and it had not been set. She held his hand up in the sun.

"Monkey hand," she said.

Motormouth and Beanhead had already been marked for life by Mama Reponte. Now my father was Monkeyhand. Donny later shortened it to Monkey, the name by which folks back home knew him. He told me that in case we ever got a call sometime and someone wanted to speak to Monkey, that was him. I imagined that such a call would come one day and that it would be Mama Reponte herself on the line and that she would tell me about my future.

The nurse called him then and he got up and disappeared down the hall. I lolled in the warm sunshine and waited, images of waves and Mama Reponte drifting through my mind.

He wasn't gone long. When he came back into the waiting room he had the papers still rolled up tightly and was idly slapping them against his thigh as he walked.

"Okay, kid," he said. "Let's get to work."

On our rumbling, bumpy ride to the restaurant I remembered what had awakened me that morning -- the sound of the mockingbirds in the trees in our neighbor's backyard. They used to perch in our trees, too, when we first moved in, but when I started shooting at them they had abandoned our yard and would not return.

"I heard mockingbirds this morning," I told my father.

"Heard what?"

"Mockingbirds in Mr. Henderson's trees."

He nodded, then a look of recognition crossed his face.

"That's what I heard," he said. "I was dreaming and then I heard something and woke up. Mama Reponte. Old woman was in my dream. Haven't thought about her in a while. She was talking to me, but I can't remember what she said."

"Maybe she was telling you about the future," I said.

"Maybe."

The bankers showed up near the end of the lunch hour and sat at the small table near the front door. The lunchtime rush had died down and there were five other empty tables closer to the large ceiling fans, but for some reason they sat near the door, where the heat hit them every time someone entered or left, and the sun blazed insistent and harsh through the large plate glass window. The younger of the two, a clean-cut, athletic-looking guy about thirty, sat bent over some papers on the table. His partner was in his fifties, a grey-faced, overweight man. I didn't have any tables to bus right then, so I was sitting behind the register, near the door, reading a Conan the Barbarian comic book. My father came out of the kitchen when Delores told him they were here.

"Hello," my father said.

The young man was scribbling something on a notepad. He squinted at my father. "We've already been helped," the young man said.

My father was accustomed to being ignored or patronized by haoles. It was the way many of them acted toward non-haoles, he said, unless they specifically needed something. But to be treated this way in his own restaurant was different. He put his hands on his hips and stared at the young man, who had gone back to his scribbling. The older man cocked his head.

"You Chen?"

"That's right. I'm the owner."

The young man looked up.

"Mr -- Chen?" he said. "Oh, right -- Mr. Chen."

"That's me, Frank Chen."

The younger man apologized and he and his partner stood up. "Bill Bolton," he said, "and this is my partner, Tom Grumman. First Valley Savings and Loan."

My father shook their hands and thanked them for coming over to the restaurant so he wouldn't have to leave the kitchen. He pulled a chair from the nearest table, surveying the dining room to make sure all the other customers had been served. He sat down at the table with Bolton and Grumman, then called me over and asked me to bring the insurance papers from the office. I retrieved the papers and set them in front of my father as Delores arrived with the men's drinks. Chinese tea for Bolton, a tall glass of water for Grumman. She asked my father if he wanted anything, but he waved her off. I went back to my stool behind the counter.

"Nice place you got here," Grumman said, looking at his legal pad and nodding as he spoke. "Very nice."

"Thanks," my father said.

Conan the Barbarian was in a death struggle with a giant snake, but I lowered the comic book anyway and looked around at the China Star's plain

walls, worn linoleum and sun-faded furniture. Very nice?

"It's not much, you know," my father said, "but we're trying."

Bolton silently toasted my father with his cup and took a dainty sip.

"Well, we've looked over the numbers and we've been asking Tony a lot of questions," Grumman said. "Making stupid loans is the thing that kills a banker and this is not a stupid loan. It's a damn good loan. Usually people trying to open a restaurant don't know the first thing about running a business. The wife likes to cook and the husband decides, what the hell, make the wife happy. They go belly up in eighteen months."

Bolton looked up at me and winked and flashed a smile. I returned to Conan's struggle with the giant snake without acknowledging him.

"But you boys have already done it," Grumman said. "Put your own money up, your sweat, even your blood, I'm sure, you being a cook." Grumman and Bolton laughed and, a second later, I heard my father's mirthless chuckle. "So we brought the paperwork with us. All you have to do is sign the application and the check is pretty much yours."

I peeked around my comic book. Grumman opened up a folder and slid it across the table to my father, indicating with his pen where he should sign.

"This one here's for you, this one for Tony."

Dolores was scuttling back and forth behind my father between the cash register, the kitchen and the three tables where customers were seated. She

chatted and joked with the diners, but she grew quiet each time she walked near the table where my father and the bankers sat. She took a check up to the register and, though I was fully capable of ringing it in, rang it in herself. My father waved her over to the table. She came over clutching a few bills and some change in one hand, some fortune cookies in the other.

"Yes?" she said.

She usually said something like "Whatcha need, honey," but today she was acting proper.

"Bring us a pot of tea and two cups," my father said.

"Sure," she said. "Be right back."

I finished my comic and looked up. Through the restaurant's large glass window, I could see outside on the sidewalk a customer who had just left, an old woman who had been eating by herself. She was Asian, maybe Filipino. I couldn't tell; I wasn't nearly as good at telling Filipinos from Thais or Malaysians as my father was. As I watched, she stuck a pipe in her mouth and held a match over the bowl. I could still smell the aroma of the bowl she had smoked in the restaurant. She shuffled slowly down the sidewalk, her loose dress hanging down to her bony knees, leaning forward on her cane as though she were walking into a stiff wind.

I walked over to clear her table. She had had beef and broccoli, but not very much of it. I felt funny when people didn't eat all of their meals, as though

they were chastising my father, pronouncing his cooking unsatisfactory. She had left a small tip, twenty-five cents in nickels, and on top of the coins her unopened fortune cookie. We weren't supposed to reuse the fortune cookies, even if the person hadn't touched them, but I put this one in my pocket to eat later on. No one would care if I ate it.

My father and the bankers were talking about interest rates and payment schedules, and lots of numbers. The paper placemat in front of them was covered with squiggles and figures. Still intrigued by the old woman, I went outside into the dry, oven heat of the midday just as a blue Cadillac pulled up in front of the restaurant, tires rubbing the curb. Tony Ramirez swung his door open and pulled himself out of the car. His crew-cut hair, glistening with some kind of tonic, looked like a porcupine's quills. He held a briefcase in one thick hand and came around the front of the car tucking and smoothing his clothes with the other. He was chomping on a cigar.

"Hey, Tony," I said.

My father insisted that I refer to all adults as Mr. or Mrs., but Tony always made me call him Tony.

"Hey, little partner. They here?"

"Yeah, they're talking about money," I said.

I stepped out onto the sidewalk and leaned to get a look down the street to my left, surveying the intersection, the bare treeless sidewalk, the new traffic

light, the shimmering of the noon heat off the asphalt. No old woman in sight.

"Everything okay?" Tony asked. "They bring the papers?"

"I guess," I said. "They're just explaining everything," I said, turning to look up the sidewalk in the other direction.

"That's the warmup," Tony said. "Now it's time to step up to the plate." He pulled out a handkerchief and patted his face. "Hot," he said vehemently. He winked at me. "That how you like your women, kid?" I felt my neck and face get warm. "Too hot. Phew! I like my women hot, but my weather cool. Huh? Right?" He laughed and pushed open the door. "Well, let's do some business. See if you can get Delores to bring me some iced tea, okay?"

I shoved my hands into my pockets and went back inside. In my right pocket were my keys and loose change, in the left my pen knife and the old woman's fortune cookie. I fidgeted with the cookie, rubbing my thumb along the edge where the tip of the fortune protruded.

With Tony's arrival everything had to start over again, the chit chat, the details, the invitation for the men to have something to eat. "You sure, now?" Tony said several times. "At least have some soup. Frank makes great hot and sour soup."

After weeks of wondering and worrying about this loan my father had the pen in his hand and was ready to sign. But he looked like he didn't know what he wanted to do, sign the papers or jab the pen in Tony's neck to keep him from

talking. Delores and I exchanged looks behind Tony's back. She called him "the last of the red-hot loafers." He had money invested in the restaurant, but he never did any work, not even to help set out the silverware. "You'd think lifting a fork would kill him," she would say. If my father wasn't around, sometimes we'd do impressions of Tony. I'd thrust my stomach out and walk around with a thumb in my waistband, smoking an imaginary cigar. Delores would mimic his faint Mexican accent and smack her lips.

"So you explained the collateral deal and everything?" Tony asked the bankers.

My father gave him a blank expression.

"You put up the restaurant as collateral," Grumman said to my father.

"You mean you would take our business?" my father asked, glancing at Tony.

Tony had cut his cigar, but he still hadn't lit it. He kept putting it into and taking it out of his mouth.

"Not the whole business. We'd just be entitled to a share of the business commensurate to the dollar value still owed," Bolton said.

"We'd take the assessed value of the business," Grumman explained, scribbling on a piece of paper, "and we take the dollar amount that you owed us." Grumman circled a figure on his pad. "So let's say that you owed forty thousand and you couldn't make the payments. We would take that portion of

the business."

"Take?" my father said.

"Usually it's a lien," Grumman said. "We put a lien on the business and then when you sell, the bank gets its money."

"Of course, that's a very remote possibility," Bolton said quickly. "That would be if there were no other way for you to make good on your note. I mean, even if the new restaurant failed, you would still have the China Star."

Everyone was looking at my father now. He didn't say anything. Tony slowly pulled the cigar out of his mouth and held it in front of him, inspecting the soggy, chewed end. He rolled it back and forth between his thumb and index finger. I imagined its rank smell, the odor he would leave behind when he came into the back office to check on the books, close the door and light up. I wanted to knock the nasty thing from his hand.

"I'm telling you, Frank," he said, still looking at the soggy cigar. "More and more people moving into Barton from the Bay Area. They're used to Chinese food there and they're gonna want it here. It's either us now or somebody else later."

It was true. My father had always been impressed when, on our trips to San Francisco's Chinatown for special supplies, we had to drive through crowded streets and maneuver down clogged sidewalks. Most of the people weren't Chinese.

"Okay," he said.

He leaned forward and carefully signed his name beside the check mark. Then Tony signed, and the two bankers, and the papers got tucked away in Bolton's briefcase. They left and it was all over. If everything went well we'd be opening a restaurant in Barton. I was excited, but I felt left out. The China Star was mine, too. There should be something for me to do, besides watch and listen. I wanted to sign something or shake someone's hand.

The China Star was empty now; lunch hours were over. Delores locked the front door and drew the curtains, flipped the sign on the door to CLOSED and started counting out the money in the register. I heard the click and chink of the coins, the rustle of bills, the faint numbers she called out to herself.

"What are we going to call it?" I asked my father.

"Huh?" He gave me a blank look.

"The new restaurant," I said. "What're we going to name it?"

"Oh, yeah. Well, I don't know. How about we leave that up to you?"

He looked over at me and his expression looked like that of a man who had just gone fifty thousand dollars in debt.

I forgot about the fortune cookie until that night. I was standing in the kitchen holding the refrigerator door open, trying to decide if I wanted anything to eat, when I put my hand in my pocket and felt the familiar shape. I sat down at the table with a grape soda and broke open the cookie. "For the tree to

grow, the acorn must fall," the fortune read, a more cryptic message than the usual statements about money and travel. It didn't mean anything to me. I ate the stale cookie and washed it down with soda.

CHAPTER THREE

The week after my father and Tony signed the loan papers was a week of stunning, bludgeoning heat and a thickness in the air that made people groan out loud when they left their houses or walked back onto the street from an air conditioned shop. It was always hot in Ferris during the summer, with the temperature breaking 100 for days, sometimes weeks, on end, but it was mostly a dry, daytime heat. At night the temperature would drop and breezes would blow. You could feel human again. Every once in a while, though, a blanket of humidity would settle in and nighttime would bring no relief. That was the kind of weather we were having now. I lay in bed at night with all the covers kicked to the foot of the bed, unable to sleep, barely able to breathe, pictures churning through my mind of girls – girls in jeans, girls in bikinis, naked girls. Through our windows wafted the sounds of other houses on the street, sometimes Johnny Carson, other times someone's hi fi, occasionally a fight between a husband and wife. A tantalizing breeze would ease through the house, bringing the smells of the fields and orchards behind our subdivision. The houses on our side of the street backed onto a farm. At night I would smell sweet peaches and the rank stench of the peach packing plant, alfalfa and rye and, from far off, the onion packing plant and its own brand of stink. Sometimes the smells and the heat would be so strong that they would wake me. There was nothing I

could do about it since we didn't have air conditioning. We could only afford air conditioning for the restaurant, my father said. We could bear being warm at home, but people wouldn't put up with such heat in order to eat in a restaurant..

I tried to keep from thinking about sex, but it was hard, especially on those hot nights when I couldn't sleep and I became even more aware of my own body, right down to thinking I could feel the weight of the air on my skin. It was supposed to be a sin to jerk off, but it was a relief, the only one I knew of. Praying for these thoughts and feelings to go away didn't seem to work.

I wanted something to happen, something to do with sex, for sure, but even something more besides that. I wanted something to change in my life. There were times now when I would get this feeling that things would go on the same way forever, that the sameness of our lives would never be threatened, never broken. My father would cook and run the restaurant and I would be there with him, trapped. We would come home and watch tv, drink cheap soda, play checkers. Other kids would go off to live in the world, to live out their lives, but I would be there in Ferris, safe, quiet, respectable, the way my father liked it. It was important to have people think well of you, he kept saying; it was even more important to be worthy of that respect. To me, the words didn't mean anything. If we had respect, it didn't seem to get us anything. A Chinese restaurant wasn't the world.

I would usually get up once or twice during the night to get a glass of water or something to eat. Before my father and Tony signed for the loan, I would have to feel my way through the darkened house to the cool linoleum of the kitchen. Now, though, the kitchen light would be on and my father would be sitting at the table reading a week-old newspaper, or at the wooden picnic table out on the patio, smoking a cigarette in the dark. "Hungry," I would say, or "thirsty," and he would nod at me, if he were there at the table, or say "Okay," from outside in the dark. When I got up the next morning he would already be doing some chore or watching tv, the only evidence that he might have gone to bed the fact that he was wearing different clothes than he had the night before.

The odd thing about this particular morning was not that he was up at five thirty, but that, apparently, he was up on the roof: While I was still in bed I heard a thudding, crunching sound above me that awakened me from a dream about Teresa Jones, a girl in the seventh grade I had liked for a few weeks this past year. It wasn't an overtly sexual dream -- we were riding around on a merry-go-round -- but still I was frustrated to wake up facing my pillow and to realize that I hadn't spoken to Teresa Jones and that she was still oblivious to me.

I got dressed and went outside and looked up at my father on the roof. He stood with his back to me, hands on his hips, facing east. It was early, just past dawn, and his silhouette stood out against the pink smudge of the sunrise. I

stood barefoot on the lawn near our sickly eucalyptus tree, the dew cold on my feet. I could feel the heat from all those long days radiating off the side of the house. I wanted to know what he was doing up there, but it seemed like I was spying on him and that I should leave him alone. Then he turned around and looked down at me.

"Hey, kid. I wake you up?"

"I guess."

"Everything okay?" he asked.

"Yes."

I didn't ask him what he was doing up there because of what I knew he believed about how children should talk to parents. My father wasn't old-fashioned the way he said his parents were in the old country Chinese way. But there were still ways, he said, that young people talked to older people. Or ways that they didn't talk to them. Asking them what they were doing was one of those ways.

He was just an outline there above me. I couldn't see his face. "Go ahead and put some water on the stove," he said. "I'm going to just check out a few more things up here and then we'll get some coffee and some breakfast."

"Okay."

Next door in the Hendersons' backyard, the mockingbirds were threading through trees and screeching at each other. I hesitated on the patio and

listened to them. I was glad they were still alive. I was through with killing birds, after what Ryan had done to the blackbirds.

Inside I put the hot water kettle on the stove to boil and went back to my bedroom. I didn't usually get up this early in the summer – after all, that's not what summer mornings were for – but I couldn't get back to sleep. I went into my little bathroom, flicked on the light and blinked at my reflection in the mirror until my eyes got adjusted.

There he was, the same brown kid with the same wavy, wiry hair. I hadn't changed magically in the night. Worse, I knew I was getting darker, if not each day, then certainly week by week. The kids I knew were white, and though they didn't seem to mind me, they made jokes about Black people and Mexicans, called them names. The message was clear – there was no value in being a nigger or a spic, no reason to want to be darker. But I was getting darker. The sun was making me darker and I knew that it wasn't just a tan, that it wouldn't go away. I didn't know that I was Cape Verdean then. My father always said I was Portuguese and never explained it further. When I saw pictures of people in Portugal in my geography book, I didn't see many people who looked like me or my mother. "Portagees come in all colors, just like Mexicans," my father said.

The hard fact that I was getting darker had first hit me two weeks ago, when *The Ferris Signal* printed its junior high graduation issue. The second section of the paper was full of photographs – group pictures of the graduating

classes, close-ups of valedictorians, graduates throwing their mortar boards into the air. At the graduation ceremony, Mrs. Cotton, one of the English teachers, had given me the Journalism Club Award for my work on the school newspaper. This moment had been immortalized in the pages of the Signal, except I almost didn't see the picture when I looked through the paper. I recognized Mrs. Cotton immediately, but the kid in the picture with her didn't register. Then I saw my name. Was it really me, this kid who looked Mexican or, worse, black? I looked closer and recognized the design on my tie. I got a sickish feeling in my stomach, like someone had slugged me in the gut.

I thought maybe it was just a dark picture, but Mrs. Cotton sure looked her normal pale self and so did the kids in the other pictures on the same page. I glanced at my hands holding the newspaper. They were dark. But as dark as the kid in the photo? I looked through the few pictures of my mother that we had, but it was hard to tell just exactly how dark she was from the black and white photos. Even if she was dark, I didn't know why, or if she had started out light, as I had, and just got darker and darker.

There was no one I could ask. It would be easier to just be who and what everyone thought I was -- my father's son, Hawaiian and Chinese -- and not this, whatever I was, this changing thing. It would be even easier, of course, to be white. Not necessarily blond with blue eyes, but just pale enough to avoid the questions. I was going to high school in the fall and it would be time for dating,

and the best girls, the ones I was interested in, didn't go for Black or Mexican guys or, probably, not even Hawaiian-Chinese guys. That's just the way it was.

I looked into the mirror now and wished for pimples and blotches, a manageable kind of besmirchment, things that would go away, things that everybody had. But all I saw looking back at me was brown.

We sat down to breakfast. I hated staying inside the house now that it was summer, but my father was determined that we start the morning together. At least twice during the day I rode my bike down to The China Star for lunch and dinner and my restaurant chores, but my father wanted a sense of order to prevail and he thought it should begin with breakfast. He liberally sprinkled soy sauce over his breakfast of rice and eggs, broke the yolks and mixed everything together, a brown-orange-white mess. At The China Star he was always concerned about how food looked on the plate, whether or not things were balanced, if the colors were right. At home, he just wanted to eat.

I stared at the mess he had made and scooped cereal into my mouth and chewed, shoveled in more cereal, a continuous motion. Scoop, chew, scoop, chew. Just like my mother, he had told me once. It was like my dancing, too. How did something like that get passed on?

"Don't eat so fast," he said.

"Okay," I answered, ready to oblige because I was finished, rising from the table to take my bowl to the sink.

"And don't be such a wise guy," my father said.

"Okay."

"Are you a wise guy at school? I know you're smart, but are you a wise guy?"

I vigorously shook my head and the shaking created a rhythm, a drum beat, that infected the rest of my body. For a few seconds I did a vague dance, swaying and shaking to the drums, the soles of my feet slapping the linoleum, reminiscent of something we had seen on tv the week before, a National Geographic special. An African tribe had done their ritual dance for the harvest to the rhythm of these deep, booming drums that the drummers wore on cords fastened around their necks. Although I felt funny about my father sitting there in the living room with me, I had gotten up and danced with the tribe.

The fit left me and I stopped dancing and went to the refrigerator to start making my lunch. My father made a sound with his teeth and went back to his breakfast.

I started to get together the day's provisions: two bologna sandwiches, an orange, some cookies and a can of Shasta grape soda. At least once a week I stayed home for lunch or made a trek with Ryan. We never knew beforehand where we would be going, or how long we'd be there, so I liked to be prepared.

"Is -- is something wrong with the roof?" I asked.

My father cleared his throat. "I was -- I got up early," he said, "and I was just thinking about things."

"You always get up early."

"*Early* early," he said. "Like when we used to go surfing when I was a kid. It made me think about home. We used to go down to the day side of the island --"

"Day side?"

"The side where the sun comes up. We would go down there and wait for the sun and then surf with the sun behind us, trying to catch our shadows."

I was never too interested in his surfing stories because I was afraid of the water and couldn't swim too well. He had tried to teach me, but the chlorine in pools made him sick, and around Ferris the only place to swim was in pools. I had taken lessons at the town pool several summers ago, but despite the calm, confident teaching of the lifeguards I couldn't get over my fear. They could teach me whatever they wanted while I was in shallow water, but as soon as we went to the deep end the panic set in and I flailed and sank until one of the lifeguards retrieved me. On Saturdays when the Wide World of Sports was showing surfing competitions, my father would take the small tv we had in the closet down to the restaurant and watch the competition as he cooked. I thought it made about as much sense as watching golf.

My father continued, "I was sitting out on the patio and I thought about that and I wanted to see the sun come up," he said.

I had never seen the sunrise, I realized, but it didn't seem like such a great thing.

"What I found up there was a lot of birds, a lot of dead birds," he said. "You know something about them?"

I didn't answer right away. I finished making the sandwich and wrapped it in cellophane. I carefully placed it in the brown paper bag. I imagined what those dead birds looked like. I remembered the thrill I felt seeing them drop from the tv antenna. "Yeah," I said.

"Yeah'?"

"Yes, I shot them."

"With your bb gun."

"Yeah."

I was very carefully and slowly spreading mayonnaise on a piece of bread. What would happen next, it seemed to me, was largely dependent on how well I spread this mayonnaise. I had not turned around.

"Hey," my father said, not too forcefully, but direct enough to let me know he meant business. I turned to face him. He looked down at his plate as he spoke and only occasionally glanced at me.

"I don't think it's a good idea to kill little birds, okay?"

I shrugged. "It's just something me and Ryan do," I said.

"Well, maybe that's okay with them across the street, but I don't think it's right to kill unless your life depends on it, or you do it for food. Okay?"

I glanced at him quickly and then looked at my knife.

"Okay?" he asked again. "That BB gun was for shooting targets and cans, stuff like that."

"Yeah, okay."

"It's not that I'm trying to be mean or anything," he said.

"I know."

There was another silence and we both went back to our food.

"So, what you going to do today?" he said.

"I don't know. I guess we'll go out to the canal and then maybe over to the high school and look for golf balls. Sometimes people go out in the fields and hit golf balls and lose them in the grass."

"You going to be a golfer now?"

"They're fun to hit with baseball bats. But maybe we won't do that if Ryan's still on restriction. His dad grounded him last night. But sometimes his dad forgets about it the next day when he's drunk at night."

I regretted the words as soon as I spoke them. My father knew that Ryan's father was a drunk, everyone on the street knew it, but that was the kind of thing

he felt you shouldn't repeat. Repeating things like that never accomplished any good for anyone. I knew what was coming.

"Just because it's true doesn't mean you have to repeat it."

I nodded, looking at my shoes.

He pointed at my bag. "You not coming by for lunch?"

"I don't think so," I said.

"Well, don't forget your chores." I never did, and he knew that, but he would always remind me. "Lawn needs to be mowed today."

"Yes."

I was in the hallway before the refrigerator door had shut a final time.

"O-e," my father called. It was my nickname from when I was little and couldn't pronounce my own name. He hadn't used that name in a long time.

"Yes?"

I backed up into the kitchen doorway.

"Give a call if you're going to be late, huh?"

I nodded. "Okedoke."

My father dismissed me with a wave. I waved back and kept on waving, propelling myself out of sight, out of the house, and all the way across the street.

I couldn't remember calling myself O-e. Those days were the long ago days, completely hazed over. I could almost swear I didn't even have a mother

back then, if it weren't for the few yellowed pictures my father kept in a shoe box in the closet: my mother and I dressed up on Easter Sunday, I with a little beanie, she in a pink skirt and matching jacket and hat; the three of us at an amusement park somewhere in New Hampshire, crouched in front of the lion's cage.

A good portion of my thoughts and feelings about my mother centered around why she had given me the name she had. Why such an odd name? Why couldn't I have been a Tom or Bill or Dave? She had named me after Rory Calhoun, my father had explained to me once. Who was that? A movie star. What kind of movie star? Not a very good one. I had gone to the almanac then and looked up this namesake of mine. What I found was "Calhoun, Rory.....Los Angeles..... 8/8/23." There was not much evidence I could uncover of this other Rory beyond occasional movies on television late on weekend nights, or on Saturday afternoons. Rory Calhoun had a dark face and dark hair; in that we were alike. But Rory Calhoun rode horses, and I, Rory Chen, was afraid of horses, their size, their clopping hooves, their large teeth. Or Rory Calhoun was a cop or a gangster and he beat people up, and Rory Chen was more likely to be beaten up, not because he was afraid or because he was weak, but because he was consistently uncertain whether or not fighting back was right.

O-e. No one knew this name except for the two of us. I didn't tell it to anyone, not even to Ryan, to whom I had, regrettably, told a lot of other things. I knew what kids would say if they learned of this name. They would turn it into Oreo or Oleo, or the chant of the troll-soldiers who served the Wicked Witch of the West. O-e-O, E-O-O! Luckily, my father had never called me by the name when any of my friends were around.

The sun was already hot on my head, browning me, darkening me even more. I ran across the street into the Azios' yard, under the shade of their sycamore tree, and leaped the last few feet onto the front steps.

I walked into the house without knocking. Ryan's mother worked, so during the day there was no one home but Ryan. His older brothers were hardly ever around. Nick was usually out on the road somewhere, Ryan told me, and Sam, was too old to live with them and was probably in jail anyway.

I found Ryan in his bedroom, motionless on his bed, smoking a cigarette. Ryan had been smoking for four months now and his parents, he said, didn't mind. He tried to recruit me, but so far I had refused. I didn't like the way my father smelled when he smoked, or the way the house smelled. I didn't want to stink. "Who cares how you smell?" Ryan said. "Who gives a shit?"

Ryan squinted at me through a veil of smoke but didn't move. He was the same height as I, but something about the way he lay there made him look longer. Ryan's hair almost reached his shoulders and now, as usual, looked

dirty. When he wasn't wearing ratty black high top sneakers, he wore boots. Today he had on boots. The way he wore his hair, parted at the side and pulled across his brow, made him look like he had no forehead. He was always flipping his hair back with a jerk of his head and tucking it behind his ear.

"Dude," Ryan said.

"Hey," I said. "What number are you on?"

"Four," Ryan said.

Ryan was working himself up to a full pack of cigarettes a day. He had a chart I had seen on which he had penciled in the gradual increase in cigarettes that would take him to his desired goal by the end of the summer. It seemed a silly thing to do, because come fall he wouldn't be able to smoke in school.

"The last two I chained," Ryan said. "It's a rush."

I didn't know what a rush was yet, but from what Ryan had told me about marijuana, I had a vague idea that it was similar to the feeling I got when I rode some of the midway rides at the county fair in Barton.

"I think I'm going to try Pall Mall non-filters next," Ryan said. "This dude says they're almost as good as grass the first month. Then you get used to them."

Ryan's room was a mess. He shared it Nick, who was almost seventeen and only returned to town about once a month from one of his "adventures."

Nick would hold court and tell us stories of whores in San Francisco and bikers in Oakland, giving us detailed descriptions of fucking and fighting and drugs. The way he talked made me feel warm and embarrassed and thrilled and ashamed. I wanted to see such women for myself, yet I felt sorry for them. For a few days everything would be fine. Ryan and I would follow Nick around, eating up his every word. Then Mrs. Azio would try to get Nick to get his hair cut, and Mr. Azio would yell at him about being a bum and would try to get him to cut the lawn or wash the car. In another two or three days Nick would be gone, off again, hitching a ride away from Ferris. So the room was essentially Ryan's, and he abused and dirtied each square inch. Multicolored piles of sour laundry rose from the faded purple shag carpet. Boots and old sneakers and comic books and Alaskan winter coats spilled from the closet like some gutted animal's intestines. Every available spot on the four walls was plastered over with rock posters and blacklight fantasy scenes of dragons and castles and ghost ships crewlessly sailing the rough, dark sea. Nick's bed, on the other side of the room from Ryan's, was covered with whatever Ryan wanted to throw on it – some days his schoolbooks, other days his model airplanes, sometimes stuff he'd picked up on our joureys. I was fascinated and repulsed by his room.

Ryan was using an ashtray that his father had brought back from Vietnam. His mother didn't like it and she didn't like Ryan or his father using it, but they ignored her. The ashtray was formed in the shape of a woman lying on her

back with her legs spread wide and her arms reaching up behind her. There was a big circular bowl where her belly should be and this was where the ashes went. If you wanted to put your cigarette down, you put it in the little groove between her legs.

Ryan put his cigarette down in the groove and slid it back and forth.

"Oooh, baby," he said. "Ooh."

I laughed nervously. I felt even more embarrassed than when my father and I were watching tv and a love scene came on -- I always felt warm, especially at serious kissing. It was stuff I was interested in, but my father didn't have to know. With Ryan I was embarrassed because I didn't want to participate in sex talk and run the risk of revealing how little I knew about girls. I had kissed some girls, but that was about it. I was fairly sure, though not absolutely certain, that Ryan had gone all the way with a girl. He was different from me, better than I was at the kinds of things you weren't supposed to do -- cigarettes, fire, sex. Some kids talked about doing forbidden things and it was obvious they were making it up. Ryan's stories sounded and felt true.

Ryan crushed the cigarette out in the woman's stomach and swung his legs over the side of his bed. His long hair fell forward across his face. He let it hang there for a second, then flipped it back over his shoulder with a head jerk.

"Where's your rifle?" Ryan asked.

"My Dad busted me," I said. "He found birds on the roof."

"Bummer," Ryan said. "You want a drink?"

"Sure."

In our short friendship we had already established a few rituals. Liquor was Ryan's domain. Since it was his idea and his father's liquor cabinet, I figured that if we ever got caught, I could always claim that it was Ryan's idea. I didn't know what the Azios thought about blame, but as far as my father was concerned, the blame often belonged to whoever had thought up the idea.

We went into the kitchen. Ryan jimmied the lock on the cheap liquor cabinet his father had bought in Tijuana and then he reached into the back, past the whisky and gin and vodka and brought out the sloe gin bottle, our bottle, dark and promising. His parents didn't drink sloe gin and probably didn't even know the bottle was still there. We had been making our little drinks from it for a while, but we knew we would have to stop soon. If his parents ever checked the bottle they would find it diluted with water.

I got the 7-up from the refrigerator and Ryan started making the drinks.

"What'll it be, pardner?"

"Sloe gin fizz, barkeep."

"Coming right up."

Ryan poured a dollop of the sloe gin into a glass, which he held at eye level. He was meticulous about the drinks he mixed; he had to be careful that

he didn't use too much booze and give the whole thing away. Besides, as he liked to say, we just wanted to catch a little buzz, not get wasted.

He put the bottle down and handed me the glass. It was my responsibility to add my own 7-up. I poured about half a glass full and stirred the pink, bubbling concoction with a spoon. I could already taste it, could already feel the "buzz," the fuzzy slow motion underwater sensation, warm, cozy.

Ryan had poured his gin and put the bottle down on the tabletop when the doorbell rang. We froze. He tried to look calm and held a finger to his lips.

"Wait right here," he said.

I stood at the sink, drink in hand, and felt the universe contract around me until I remained at its center, visible, scared and guilty. The pulse in my head whumped. I strained to listen, but the sounds in the front hall were muffled. Putting my drink down, I screwed the cap back on the bottle as quickly and as quietly as I could and slowly moved toward the liquor cabinet. I grabbed its doorknob, only to find it closed tight. I tugged at it. I had watched Ryan work the lock several times, but I had never paid close attention. Bottles rattled inside, but the door remained shut. I heard Ryan coming back to the kitchen. I could tell from the sound that someone else was with him. Then I turned and saw Ryan in the doorway, looking scared.

"It's the police," he said.

CHAPTER FOUR

I didn't think, I just ran -- out of the kitchen, through the garage and down the walkway. I was straddling the Azios' fence when I heard laughter behind me and turned to see Ryan, Brett Doss and Donny Bilecki pointing at me from around the corner of the house and snickering. There had been no police, of course. They had made a fool of me and they would tell the story for a long time. I tried to climb down with as much dignity as I could, but I slipped and came down head first, scraping my shin on the top of the fence and landing hard on my hands. The boys hooted.

"Hey, man," Brett said. "You're supposed to walk on your feet, not your hands!"

I got up, grimacing and shaking my numb hands.

"You should be in the circus," Donny said. "The incredible fence-climbing Chinese monkeyman!"

Brett and Donny stood on the walkway side by side with Ryan behind them, grinning. Brett was the taller of the two, a loose limbed, bony kid who was all angles. His nose was sharp and big-nostriled, his chin pointed. Even his hair, thick and unruly, looked sharp. Donny was shorter and rounder and more cruel. The extra weight around his waist jiggled as he laughed. At one

time he had been picked on because of his weight, but he had gotten mean and sneaky over the years and now people left him alone.

Their fathers were colonels. Brett's father was the commander of the base's supply squadron and Donny's commanded the fighter squadron. Between them they "owned" the base. Officers' kids, especially colonels' kids, had a special status in an Air Force town. They got away with things other kids couldn't pull off, or at least that was the impression everyone had. If your father was active duty enlisted, or a junior officer, you didn't want to cross a colonel's kid because your father might pay the price some day. Donny and Brett were popular in junior high and they both had older brothers in high school, so when we started the ninth grade in a few months, they would be good friends to have, even though they were jerks.

I wanted to tell them to go to hell, but anything I said would only make them laugh harder, and they were the kind of kids whose stupid, senseless laughter could bore into you like a dentist's drill. Punching one of them wasn't an option. I didn't know how to fight. And there were two of them and they were bigger than me and they were colonels' kids. Something was wrong, anyway. They had never come over to Ryan's house before, had never hung out with him.

"You should have seen your face, man!" Brett said. "You were really freaked out."

They all laughed again. Ryan stared at me, his eyes bugging out. "Police!" he yelled, and the laughter broke out again, echoing in the narrow space between the Azio's garage and their neighbor's.

I forced myself to laugh, too, playing along. My hands were still burning, but I kept them at my sides. We went back into the house. I didn't feel like having my drink now, but Brett and Donny insisted on "catching a buzz," and they wanted us to join them. Donny picked up my drink and put his nose down into the glass, sniffing. "What's this?" he asked.

"It's a sloe gin fizz," I told him. The sight of his nose poking down over the rim of the glass gave me the willies. "You can have it."

I picked the bottle back up from where I had set it. Then I saw the new paper bag on the kitchen table next to my lunch. The other boys sat at the table and made a game of wrestling over the bag. The horseplay ended when they knocked Donny's glass over and spilled the drink onto the table top.

"Clean it up, stupid," Ryan said, snatching the bag out of the path of the widening pool.

Donny stared at him hard for a second. Probably no one had ever called him stupid and given him an order in the same sentence before, and in a confident voice, at that. Ryan sat with the bag in his lap, looking at me over the rim of his glass. Donny made a noise and grabbed some paper towels to wipe up the spilled drink.

"What's in the bag?" I asked.

"You're so smart, you tell us," Brett said.

I had gotten used to being kidded for being smart and getting good grades. Brett and Donny might be colonels' kids, but they weren't as smart as I was.

"Yeah, Chinaman, use some voodoo and see," Brett added.

"Voodoo isn't Chinese," I said, and knew immediately that trying to talk sense to these guys was useless.

"Voodoo doodoo," Brett said. "Chinaman hineyman."

Brett and Donny snorted. Ryan, ignoring them, put his glass down, held the bag toward me and opened it for me to take a look. I approached the bag and peered in. It was a magazine, a stack of magazines actually, though I couldn't tell in the dim kitchen light what kind.

"Magazines," Ryan said.

"What kind?" I asked.

"The best kind," Brett said.

I looked closer. There was a woman on the cover. Her head was turned to the side, but she was looking at me out of the corner of her eye. Her mouth was full of something that bulged against her cheek. What was she eating? I strained to get a better look, and when I saw the outline of the man's torso

against her, I felt something shoot through me like electricity. It was a penis in her mouth. I looked up at the other boys. They were staring at me.

"Pretty wild, huh?" Ryan said.

Before I could answer, Ryan had dumped the magazines from the bag. I felt dizzy as I watched the pages flip by upside down. Inverted like this, the photos were a confusion of bizarre images. Flesh entwined with flesh, arms, legs, backs, butts, faces, penises, pubic hair, breasts, all mixed up. Eyes bulged, mouths contorted, hair tangled. The people seemed to be grimacing or shouting. Some of the things they were doing seemed impossible.

"What are you going to do with them?" I heard myself ask.

"What do you think, butthead," Brett said.

"Don't you ever jack off?" Donny asked.

I looked away from the magazines. Each of the boys now had one and was thumbing through it greedily, grunting and hooting at the pictures. I wanted to look at the pictures, too, but they made me feel hot and queasy inside. This was it, though; this was what I had thought Ryan would bring when his family moved in. I looked at the wall over Ryan's head. Out of the corner of my eye I saw several unclaimed magazines, just waiting for me. It would be very easy. I could feel my arm wanting to reach, my hand ready to grab. Everybody was doing it.

And that realization changed my mind. Brett and Donny were doing it. They might be good to have as friends, but I didn't want to be anything like them.

"I gotta go," I said.

Ryan didn't look up from his magazine. I looked at the top of his head.

"Gotta go where?" Ryan asked.

"I have to mow the lawn," I said.

One of the other boys snorted and I expected some more jokes, but no one spoke.

"It's hot," Ryan said. "Why don't you wait until dark?"

"Gotta work at the restaurant."

"Hop Sing Time!" Brett said.

Ryan shrugged. He looked up at me, squinting, getting that removed look in his eyes he always got when he was making plans.

"Go ahead and do it," Ryan said. "You gave me an idea."

"What?"

"I'm not going to tell you until you mow the lawn, dude."

"Yeah, Chinaman," Brett said. "He's not going to tell you."

"Shut up," I said.

"Make me."

The appropriate answer to this was to say "I don't make trash, I burn it," to which Brett would reply with some manner of profanity, as no one had yet come up with a fourth line in this exchange. But the net result would be the same. I remained silent.

"I'll be back when I'm done," I said to Ryan.

"Chicken," Brett said.

"Faggot," Donny added.

"See you," Ryan said, turning back to his magazine.

I was checking the oil in the lawnmower when Ryan came into our garage through the side door.

"Did they go?" I asked.

"Nope."

I saw that Ryan was carrying a plastic dish soap bottle. I knew from the beginning that we were going to burn something today, but the bottle still caught me off guard. I felt envious. I screwed the top back on the oil reservoir.

"What're you going to do?" I asked.

Ryan looked around for the gas can. I had already topped off the mower's tank and put the can away under my father's work bench. Ryan saw the can and retrieved it.

I watched him carefully pour gas into the plastic bottle, his hair swinging in his face. He didn't stop pouring until the gas overflowed the top of the bottle.

"What are you going to burn?" I asked.

He tightened the cap on the can and stood there, grinning at me. I hated him when he acted like this.

"Come on, man," I said. "What are you going to do?"

"It's a secret," he said, screwing the top on the bottle.

I followed him back outside, tilting the mower sideways on two wheels to get it through the doorway. Ryan opened the gate and held it open for me.

"Why do you let those guys hang around?" I said. "They're stupid."

Ryan closed and latched the gate behind him.

"I know," he said. "That's why they're fun."

"They're colonels' kids."

"So? What are you, afraid?"

"No. They're just so stupid. They'll tell everybody about what we do."

"Just hurry up," Ryan said. He flipped his hair and headed across the street. "We're not going to wait forever."

Before Ryan came to the neighborhood, the smell of gasoline was just part of mowing the grass, but now it was a part of burning, of the fluttery excitement of changing things, destroying them. As I had filled the lawnmower, the familiar smell had made me nervous and excited. I hated thinking that I

would miss out on burning something, but I think I hated even more the thought of hurrying on account of Donny and Brett. If I had a rock or a baseball in my hand, I would have beamed Ryan in the back of the head. Instead, I leaned over the mower, set the throttle and yanked at the starter rope. The motor gargled into life on the first pull and I grabbed the handle and lunged forward, pushing the mower over onto Mr. Henderson's side of the median strip between our driveways.

I raced over the little green rectangle. It was out in the open and even at ten in the morning the sun was fierce. I finished it off and moved to the main part of the front lawn, which was half in the shade of our large oak tree. When my father was around, I cut the lawn the way he wanted it cut, moving along the edges of the yard as though I were patrolling a perimeter of an encampment, working my way toward the middle. When he wasn't, I cut the lawn the way I wanted to. I zigged and zagged, made circles and rectangles and curlicues. I hated cutting the grass, so if I had to do it, I wanted to do it my way.

Images of the magazines bubbled in the back of my mind, but I kept them down by growling with the mower and narrating my haphazard technique in the voice of a sports announcer: "He cuts back upfield and finds daylight!" After a few minutes I realized that out in the sun I had isolated a square of grass about the size of a beach towel. I spun the mower out into the open and bore down on the lone plot. The pictures made me angry and ashamed, but I

couldn't get them out of my mind and I didn't know if I really wanted to. Miss February's picture was soft and she smiled demurely, but this was raw and harsh, and the women weren't all that pretty. The women in Playboy were beautiful, prettier than anyone I knew. The magazines they had across the street showed plain, average women who looked like people I might see around town. It made me feel kind of sick to realize that, but excited, too.

My skin was slick with sweat. The smell of grass filled the back of my throat with a sweet taste. I pushed the mower over the final piece of grass and turned the mower off.

Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb...

I was repeating Hail Marys to keep the pictures away, pushing the lawn mower back across the yard toward the garage, when three girls rode by on their bikes. Two were sisters who lived up the street, one my age, the other a couple of years younger. The older sister was a plain, shy girl and I had never spoken to her much. Her sister wasn't even in junior high yet. But the third girl I didn't recognize. She was pretty, dark-haired, just beginning to tan. I knelt by the lawnmower and pretended to be working on it as the girls languidly pedaled by. The pretty girl looked smart, but a different kind of smart than I was, different from book smart. It was as though she were body smart, as though her body knew things that she wasn't aware of, how to move, how to flick

her hair back, how to tilt her head to laugh, how to ride her bike so perfectly carefree. I felt butterflies in my stomach and then something stronger, something painful, when I wondered what she would look like in one of those magazines.

The girl turned and looked over her shoulder, looked at me, and I felt exposed and guilty, as though I were standing on the bare face of the moon, as though she had read my mind and was disgusted. I turned my attention back to the lawnmower, fussing pointlessly. Instead of praying, I counted. When I got to a hundred I looked up. The girls were gone. I sighed and hurried into the backyard with the mower.

When I was finished with the backyard, I left the lawnmower there and went into the house to pee and to get the movie camera. I had gotten more interested in making movies the past few weeks, especially since I had given up on hunting birds. I was saving as much as I could for an editing machine from the three dollars a week my father gave me for my chores and my work at the restaurant. The device was a simple 8mm film splicer with a viewing lens, but the catalog at the Base PX listed it as an "editing machine," so that's what I called it. The machine was necessary for my work. The five-minute "movies" I had made with clay figures and GI Joes were herky-jerky, disjointed, full of

mistakes. The editing machine would solve that. By the end of summer I would have the thirty-five dollars saved up. I could start making movies then.

Besides the "hunting trip," as Ryan liked to call it, which was on film still in the camera, I had recorded two burnings that summer. I couldn't wait to develop the film, but I was deeply disappointed when the rolls came back from the store. I had hoped what I recorded would look like the footage I saw on the news from the war, dramatic and dangerous. On my bedroom wall, however, where I projected the film, I saw only two shimmering orange-red shapes surrounded by a deep brown murk, and all I heard, of course, was the tickey-tickety-tick of the projector. I would just have to practice more to get better; we would have to burn more for me to get the right shots.

I went into the kitchen to get a glass of water before I returned to Ryan's. I had to get back over there in time to take part in the burning. Maybe I could earn back some respect with Donny and Brett if they saw my camera. If they were going to be friends of Ryan's, and maybe friends of mine, I had to redeem myself from what had just happened. As I ran water from the tap I thought I heard something from the garage, but when I turned the water off the sound was gone. While I was drinking I heard it again, a scraping, shuffling sound. It was then that I smelled the strange plastic smell. Something was burning.

I opened the garage door to the orange glow of a sheet of flames rippling up from the floor. The three boys faced me, frozen in the gleam of the fire, their

mouths slack. Shadows climbed up the garage walls, shrank back, skittered to the sides. Something on the floor between them curled and slowly spun in the fire.

"Close the door, motherfucker!" Donny said.

I stepped into the garage and closed the door behind me. Curling bits of burnt plastic floated in a shimmering cloud before my eyes like a swarm of exotic insects. I stood there with the camera hanging from my hand by its strap.

"Hey! What're you guys doing?" I asked.

The fire was sputtering out now, and the black thing it had consumed sizzled and executed one last half flip.

"What does it look like, brainiac?" Brett said. "We're burning things."

Ryan stood over the bit of char, the plastic dishsoap bottle in one hand, a zippo lighter in the other. Scattered behind him were a kid's garage sale dream: Hot Wheel miniature cars, model airplanes and ships, scores of gray (German), tan (Japanese) and green (U.S.) plastic soldiers, marbles, superballs, two G.I. Joes, scenery from an old train set, plastic dinosaurs, checkers, game pieces from board games, Lincoln Logs, Leggos. Ryan leered at me. "Don't shit a brick, man," he said.

"Why are you doing that here?" I asked. "We never burn anything here."

I had the sudden, panicky feeling that my father was heading home right now, that any minute I would hear the Beetle pull up into the driveway. I'd have to tell him about everything, all the burning, all the things Ryan and I had destroyed over the past weeks.

"Pick something, man," Ryan said, indicating the mess behind him. "This is far out."

"Where'd you get all this stuff?" I asked.

"They brought it," Ryan said. "Old shit from their garages."

"What you got that for?" Brett asked, pointing to my camera.

I tightened my grip on the camera's handle and wound the strap taut around my wrist. "I use it to make movies."

"Pick something," Ryan said again.

I couldn't move. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Donny cross to the pile of toys and pick through them. "We can't do this," I said. "I'll get in trouble."

"Crybaby," Donny said.

Brett moved closer to me, intent on my camera. "Let me see it," he said.

When he reached out, I pulled the camera back.

"No."

"Why don't you get something?" Ryan asked, impatiently.

"You think I'm going to break it or something?" Brett asked. "Huh? Afraid I'm going to break it?"

I had brought the camera to impress these guys, not to let them use it. I glared at Brett and took a step back when his hand came forward for the camera.

"Look, here, this'll burn good," Donny said, hopping up from the pile of toys. He placed a jumble of Japanese soldiers on the wings and fuselage of a fully decalled and painted model of a B-52. "Look, man," he said, kneeling. He turned to Brett. "Hey." When Brett ignored him Donny tugged at Ryan's pant leg. Ryan looked down at him. Donny made a pouring motion. "Come on, let me have the gas," he said.

"I'll do it," Ryan said.

Brett lunged for the camera, but I stepped back out of his reach and he snatched at air. I glared at him.

"Pussy," Brett spat. "Chinese pussy."

Brett stomped over to the other two boys, kicking out of the way the blackened mess that had been some toy of Ryan's. I felt myself moving forward, my pulse surging. The camera grip was slick with sweat. I had to stop them, but I didn't know how. They would gang up on me and shout me down, call me more names. If I just went along with them, it would be over soon and they would leave.

"That's dumb," Brett said, looking down at the model and the plastic soldiers. "Why would Japs be on a American plane?"

"Who said it made sense, stupid?" Ryan said. "It's a jet, too, right? These are World War II Japs. So? What difference does it make?"

"It makes a lot of difference," Brett said.

"Watch out," Ryan said, leaning down with his container.

"Let me," Donny said. "You did it last time."

"Shut up, get out of the way. It's mine. "

Ryan squeezed the bottle and the first arc of gasoline splashed onto the fuselage and collected in a puddle on the concrete beneath it. Donny's eyes narrowed and he smiled.

"More, man," Brett said, leaning against Ryan. "More. Soak it."

I felt the weight of the camera and hefted it to my face. Through the viewfinder Ryan's darkened figure moved carefully around the plane like a priest with a censer. Brett danced around the model, pointing to dry spots, urging Ryan on. I slightly depressed the shutter release. A little red bulb flashed on, indicating that there was insufficient light. I opened the aperture completely; the bulb still flashed its warning. I had a light that attached to the top of the camera, but it had to be plugged into an outlet and the cord it came with was too short to be of any use.

"Okay, watch out," Ryan said. He stepped back from the plane and put the plastic bottle behind him. "I'm going to light it." He turned to me and looked

surprised for a second, then started mugging for the camera. He produced his Zippo. "Burn, baby, burn," he shrieked in his wildest voice.

As I crouched down to get a better angle of the plane, the odor of the gasoline filled my head. I started filming.

Ryan knelt and cracked the top of the lighter. He stroked the wheel and the blue flame popped up. Through the viewfinder, I saw him carefully advance toward the model. A flame raced along the top of the airplane. In the corner of the frame, Brett moved away, then came back, holding the plastic bottle of gasoline.

"Here," Brett said. "Try some more of this." He leaned forward and squeezed the plastic bottle, launching a stream of gas toward the burning airplane.

Flames erupted from the model, shooting out of the frame of the viewfinder toward the ceiling. The sound came a split second later, a rushing sound like wind. As the column of flame shot up from the floor, a thin blue streak arced back toward the plastic bottle Brett stood squeezing. Ryan yelled as the thin flame raced up the thread of gasoline to its source and scuttled backwards toward me like some kind of broken crab. Brett threw the bottle toward the fire as the flame entered the spout. It seemed to hang in the air for a silent second and then exploded louder than any firecracker I had ever heard.

I felt the heat and the pressure through my clothes and on my skin everywhere at once. My face and my arms prickled. Over a ringing in my ears I heard the roaring fire and the other boys screaming. Now the far wall and the ceiling were on fire and smoke clogged my nose and throat. Inside my head, or there in front of me, colors swirled in a nauseating assault. I began coughing and I knew I had to run or I would die.

I stumbled toward the door. The screaming got louder and closer and I realized that I was yelling at the top of my lungs. Old pickle and mayonnaise jars, bottles that my father had filled with nails and screws and had kept in cabinets against the wall, were snapping, shattering, crackling.

Someone yanked open the side door ahead of me and I scrambled out into the sunshine, fighting to see, my eyes stinging and overflowing with tears. I saw two blurred shapes ahead of me in the narrow passway, moving toward the gate.

Donny ran down the driveway and into the street and kept running. The top of his head and his clothes were smoking and his first few footsteps on the concrete were outlined in black from the melting rubber soles of his sneakers. Ryan yelled at him to come back, but Donny crossed the street, grabbed his bike and started pushing it across the Azio's lawn to the street. He jumped on the bike and evaded one of my neighbors, who tried to stop him. Ryan took a few steps after him, then stopped and ran back to the driveway.

"Where's Brett?" I asked.

"I don't know. What are we going to do?"

"I don't know," I said. What I wanted to do was run, but where would I go?

People were running toward us from up and down the street. Thick gray smoke was churning out through the opened side door and from around the edges of the garage door. The small window in the garage door burst with a pop and smoke started pouring out.

"Fire, fire!" I heard people screaming and I started yelling it again, too. I yelled for Brett down the passway beside the garage, then ran around to the front of the house and headed toward the front door. An older man who lived on the next block cut me off halfway up the walkway and pulled me out into the yard.

"He's in there!" I yelled. "He's in there!"

I heard the sirens just as a hand grabbed my shoulder. I turned and saw Mr. Henderson, our next door neighbor.

"You all right?" the old man asked. His eyes were huge behind his thick glasses. I could see veins standing out in the yellowed whites. I wanted to speak but nothing came out. My face and neck were stinging.

"You're bleeding," Mr. Henderson said, bending down and inspecting me. "You got cuts on your face and looks like you got some burns, too. What you got there?"

I lifted the camera as though it were a dead bird attached to my wrist. I blinked at it. "My camera," I said.

Squealing tires announced the arrival of the first police car. Mr. Henderson and I turned to the blue and white cruiser as a lanky policeman popped out and started yelling for everybody to get back, get back away from the house. I recognized Officer Kerpich, the only cop who gave kids tickets for riding double on their bikes or not obeying traffic signals, running back and forth on our lawn, waving his arms at people to move them away from the house. He snatched his walkie-talkie from his belt and shouted into it.

"He's in there, he's still in there!" I yelled.

"What?" Kerpich said. "Who?"

"Brett! Brett's still in there!"

Kerpich turned to the house and took an uncertain step toward it, started to jog up the front walk, stopped. He snatched at the walkie-talkie and started shouting again. Over Kerpich's voice, I heard the fire engine sirens, still sounding far away, as though they hadn't gotten any closer in the last minute.

Then the front door swung open and Brett stumbled out of the house, clutching a paper bag to his chest. He pitched forward, grunting as he landed face first on the lawn. Smoke roiled out of the door behind him. A woman shrieked and Kerpich bellowed for him to run, run, run away from the house.

"Who -- who lives here?" Kerpich shouted. "Anybody know who lives here?"

"I live here," I heard myself croak.

"Anyone else in the house?" Kerpich asked.

"No, sir."

"Look," someone in the crowd said.

Flames appeared in the front doorway. A few seconds later a piece of the roof on the garage cracked and fell in and a spout of fire shot out through the hole. Fine gray ash and scraps of black flew out of the hole and began raining down on the grass and the onlookers, the street, the police cruiser. I watched one particularly large piece ascend above the house, above the treetops and drift away, seemingly borne on the spiraling wail of the first firetruck as it swung around the corner onto Dakota Street and bore down on our house, horn blating and engine thundering.

Officer Kerpich ran out to the street and flagged down the firetruck, then began herding people away from the front of the house. The driver of the fire engine leaned out the window. "Get your damned cruiser out of the way!"

Kerpich jumped into the car and backed up, the tires squealing. Two more police cars arrived. While the cops pushed back the crowd, the firemen pulled their truck into position and began unloading their equipment and getting their hoses attached to the fire hydrant two houses away. I watched as the first stream of water blasted against the house. The camera was heavy in

my hand. I brought it up to my face and started filming. I had to get this, even if it was my own house burning. Almost immediately the END light began flashing.

"You there, you," Kerpich was saying.

I looked at him. "Me?"

"Come here," the cop said, and motioned me over toward Henderson's yard, where Ryan and Brett and Mr. Henderson stood. Brett had the paper bag folded up tight and secured under his arm. He looked like he wanted to run, but he didn't budge.

"This is him," Mr. Henderson said. "This is the boy. See the camera there?"

"You okay, son?" the cop asked, speaking slowly, as though he thought I couldn't understand English very well.

I nodded. I looked at Ryan. His eyebrows were missing and his face was smeared with grey and black. He was trembling like a wet dog.

"What's your name, kid?" the Kerpich asked.

He wrote down my name on a little pad of paper.

"I live right next door, over here," Henderson said, pointing. "He's a good boy." Mr. Henderson looked at me and nodded. I looked down at my feet.

"Alright," Officer Kerpich said. He looked us over and appeared confused. "Uh, you boys go and, uh, sit in the car. I'm going to have to take you to, ah, the station for questioning."

I swallowed hard. "The police station?"

"That's right, go on now."

Kerpich waved us toward the car and looked stern. Ryan started first. I looked over at Brett. His blackened face was tight and frowning. His lower lip was pushed up in a pout and trembling and the tears were full in his eyes, ready to spill over. Stinking of smoke and gasoline, the three of us crawled onto the smooth flat backseat of the police car. No one spoke. I turned to Ryan and was surprised to see him start to cry. He stopped almost immediately, angrily wiping the tears from his eyes with the backs of his hands, then started again a few seconds later. Brett fidgeted and squirmed and finally announced that he had to go to the bathroom.

"You can go to my house," Ryan said. "The door's open."

Brett crawled out of the car without a word and we watched him approach Kerpich and point to Ryan's house. The cop nodded and Brett walked away. Ryan and I sat in silence and watched as Brett crossed the street and approached the front door. When he had reached his bike he looked back over his shoulder, grabbed a handgrip on the handlebar with one hand, and started pushing it across the lawn toward the other end of the street.

"Hey," I said, but I didn't do anything. We watched him sneak away.

An ambulance pulled up across the street and the attendants got out. One of them talked to Kerpich and then came over to the cruiser. He opened the door.

"You guys okay?" he asked. We nodded. "Well, come on and get in the ambulance. We got to take you to the hospital."

"But the cop -- " Ryan started to say.

"He's an idiot," the attendant said. "You guys need medical attention. Now come on."

We crawled out of the car and followed him across the street. He opened the back doors and got in ahead of us. As I climbed into the ambulance I turned to take a last look at the house, but all I could see was the fire engine and the dark clouds of smoking rising into the bright sunshine.

CHAPTER FIVE

No one said anything as we rumbled along. Ryan sat on one side of the ambulance and I sat on the other with the attendant next to me. Through a small oval window over Ryan's head I saw undulating telephone lines and telephone poles floating by in the pale blue sky. The motion of the lines made me feel queasy. I turned away and focused my eyes on the unused stretcher between us.

I was trying to figure out what I was going to say to my father, was trying to understand what had happened, but everything in the ambulance distracted me – the bright surfaces of equipment and the stainless steel frame of the stretcher, the clinking and rattling of metal on metal, the attendant putting a bandage over my forehead while we gently swayed, turning the corner from our street onto Fruitland Avenue. I tried to think, but I just kept hearing the fire and seeing my father's expression. I felt this hot, hard spot in the pit of my stomach. I vaguely felt the bandage going on. There was pain, but it seemed far away and unimportant.

I thought we were going to the base hospital, which was about four miles away. But instead of continuing east on Bellevue, the ambulance took a right turn toward the center of town and pulled into the emergency entrance at Bloss Memorial, the town hospital. I had never been there before, although we had

passed it many times, and because I hadn't, it didn't seem like a real hospital to me. I swallowed hard when I saw the unfamiliar building.

The admitting nurse asked me for my parent's phone number and not thinking, I gave her our number at home. She called and hung up and told me there was no ring and asked me if there was another number she could call. Didn't my father work? I was wondering if I should make up a lie when she pointed her pencil at me.

"I know you. You're the boy from the Chinese restaurant, aren't you? Me and my girlfriend go there every week."

I said yes, relieved at least from the burden of having to lie, and gave her the number. She dialed the restaurant and told me to follow another nurse, who had noiselessly arrived. The new nurse put her hand gently on my shoulder and guided me down the hall. I tried to hear what the nurse at the desk was saying into the telephone, but all I could detect was the droning, businesslike tone of her voice. The new nurse took me to an examination room and pulled the door halfway closed.

My nose was tickling. I reached up to scratch it and felt wetness. Using the sleeve of my t-shirt, I gingerly patted the blood away, feeling its stickiness through the fabric. With a sick fascination I kept swabbing the blood and watching it seep in irregular patterns on my shirt. The spots that were already dried were a weak brownish color. They reminded me of soy sauce stains.

I didn't know what else was wrong with me. I didn't feel burned, but my lungs were raw and when I took too deep a breath an uncontrollable cough rattled through me. I wanted my father, but at the same time I didn't. I wished someone would put their arms around me, and it had been years since he had done that. It was something a mother would still do to you when you were almost fourteen, but probably not what a father would do, and certainly not mine. And I wanted him to do that. The air conditioning came on with a rumble and a cold blast made goosebumps stand up on my arms. I rubbed my forearms with my hands and waited.

A nurse popped her head in to check on me and then five minutes later a weary-looking doctor pushed the door open. He glanced at his clipboard and set it down on the examining table next to me.

"How you doing, Mr. Chen?"

"Okay."

"Anything hurting other than this cut here? Feel any burns?"

"No, I don't think so."

"Mm hmm. Let's take a look then. I'm going to take this bandage off and look at your laceration. You know what a laceration is?"

"Sure," I said.

He tugged at the adhesive on the bandage and pulled it off and dropped it into a trashcan near the examining table. I stared at his craggy, sun tanned

face as he firmly pressed his fingers into my forehead. His breath smelled like stale cigarettes.

"You ever had stitches before, son?"

"No, sir."

"Well, we're going to make up for lost time today. You have a very impressive cut here. Gonna take about twenty stitches. Don't worry, though -- girls like scars."

"Yes, sir."

I wanted the doctor to tell me that I had some kind of dramatic injury, something more than just a big cut over my eye, a wound that would earn me some mercy. If I were hurt badly, my father would have to wait before punishing me. He had never punished me severely, but nothing like this had ever happened before.

"A few minor burns and cuts," the doctor said, "but nothing serious. You just be careful playing around, you hear?"

I nodded, wary of saying anything incriminating, and the doctor patted me on the shoulder and told me he would be right back. He closed the door behind him. I listened and waited. I thought I heard Ryan whimper, but it could have been anybody. It was a hospital.

They had called my father. He was probably on his way now. Who would do the cooking? Delores couldn't cook Chinese food. Reynaldo couldn't cook,

period. I should have made up a story, told the nurse that the restaurant was closed today, that my father was out of town, anything to keep from bothering him and making him have to close the China Star.

I wasn't afraid that he'd hurt me. He had never hit me, had never yanked me by the arm or grabbed me by the scruff of the neck. He hardly ever raised his voice at me. Usually when he did, it was out of frustration, rather than anger. Once, when we were at Disneyland the summer after my sixth grade year, I had gotten lost in the crowd for about ten minutes. When the security guards brought me to the information booth, he yelled at me in front of what seemed like hundreds of people. I had been nearly panic-stricken at the thought of being lost forever and expected that he would be happy to see me. The tone of his voice stunned me. I couldn't open my mouth to explain what had happened. Half an hour later he apologized and bought me a Davy Crockett coonskin cap. No, what I feared from my father wasn't physical violence, but his silence and what that silence meant, because sometimes at night as I lay in bed thinking about us and the life we had, I wondered about the days and years ahead. Would he leave, too?

Ryan had to have a cut on his arm sewn up. After we had gotten our stitches, we were taken to an observation room, where a young nurse came in and checked on us to see that the bleeding had stopped and that our

bandages were okay. Ryan shot a glance at me after she had left and cupped his hands at his chest. But I wasn't interested in goofing around. A girl's breasts were low on my list of priorities right now.

We could see through a doorway to the admitting desk. A uniformed cop came in and talked to the admitting nurse, who turned in her chair and pointed to us. She and the cop talked for a minute or so, then the cop came around the admitting station toward our room.

"Hey, you the guys from the fire?" the cop asked. He was one of the newer town cops, a young guy named Willoughby who was the older brother of someone we vaguely knew in school.

Ryan shrugged his shoulders. I nodded.

"Doing okay?" he asked

We gave him the same noncalant response.

"Well, I gotta take you to the station," he said.

"To jail?" I asked.

"No, just the police station."

"What -- what for?" Ryan asked.

"Because somebody told me to," the cop said.

Outside the room, the doctor had arrived at the admitting station and was talking to the nurse. He came to the door and called the cop outside. They

stood to one side, out of sight. We heard their voices, but couldn't catch everything they were saying.

Ryan looked at me. I shrugged at him.

" -- procedure to let minors go," I heard the doctor say.

The cop said "yes, sir," several times and said something else. We heard the words "fire," and "investigation."

" -- fear of God in them," the cop said.

"Well -- responsibility -- one way or the other," the doctor answered.

And then they apparently decided what they had to decide. The doctor came in and checked us over once more, told us to keep our noses clean, and left. The cop came back in.

"Alrighty, saddle up," he said. "We're moving out."

"What about my dad?" I said.

"He'll know where to find you," the cop said. "You guys are famous. You're the big news for today."

Our arrival at the police station was uneventful and, oddly enough, disappointing. After what the cop said, I expected a crowd to be there waiting for us, reporters from the newspaper, maybe even the television station in Fresno. A fire that big had to attract a lot of attention. Riding to the station I had envisioned the usual kind of excitement that would greet the arrival of an

infamous criminal: flash bulbs popping, the police holding the crowd of reporters back. Arms and microphones would be straining toward us and voices would shout questions. But there was no such excitement. The police car didn't even pull up to the back entrance. We rolled right up to the front, right to the double doors they took you through on the fifth-grade civic field trip. No one paid us any attention. Ryan and I just followed the cop into a small room with metal folding chairs and a small formica topped table like the tables in the school cafeteria. The cop asked me for my camera. I wondered if I really had to give it to him. I didn't know, and although I thought of raising that point, I figured it would probably only make him mad. I handed it over. "Good camera," the cop said, impressed. I thanked him. He told us to sit down and then pulled the door closed behind him.

We sat in silence for about half a minute.

"My father's got special punishments for real big fuck-ups," Ryan said.

I winced at the sound of his voice, so loud in the sterile room.

"Once," he went on, "we were at the beach at this squadron party and my dad was in charge of barbequing. I knocked over one of the barbeque grills and ruined a bunch of chicken, got it all sandy." He stopped and flipped his hair back. "There was enough chicken to go around for everybody still, but my dad got real mad and made me eat chicken with the sand on it."

I nodded, but I didn't say anything. Ryan talked about his parents, especially his father, in ways I couldn't imagine. I had picked up other ways of talking from him, favorite expressions, how he cursed, but I couldn't talk about my father in the fashion he spoke of his. It would be like betraying him. I didn't doubt the chicken story, though, because I had seen Mr. Azio in action. He was a short, skinny man who was always wearing t-shirts and green fatigue pants and smoking a bent cigarette. Like my father, he smoked so much you could smell it on his skin. Although he didn't weigh much, he was strong. His arms were knotted with muscles, and when he had to move something heavy, like furniture, or something in the garage, he would grunt and his face would get red, but whatever he was moving would get moved quickly enough. I had never seen him hurt Ryan, but I didn't need to. I had seen Ryan flinch at his father's raised voice enough times to know what happened in that house. Most of the time I was glad Mr. Azio wasn't my father, but sometimes I wondered what my father would be like if he were a little bit more like Mr. Azio. Maybe if my father were meaner, I would be tougher.

Ryan was staring at his feet and rocking in his chair. "One time we went fishing in this place in Japan," he said, still looking at his feet. "They had these big tanks along the river where they kept the fish to stock the river. Me and this guy, this airman, broke the lock and let all the fish out. That's when I got this." He pulled his hair back and showed me a dark scar above his temple. "He hit

me with his fishing pole and cut me with the hook. I got fifteen stitches. Man, I'm never going to hit my kids when I get older."

"Me, either," I said.

We both nodded together for a few seconds. Ryan started checking his pockets. "Man, I wish I had some cigarettes. I'm behind schedule." He looked around as though he expected to see a cigarette machine in the corner, or a pack of cigarettes left behind by a policeman. Seeing no relief, he turned back to me. "Your stitches hurt?"

"They burn a little."

Ryan said that stitches were cool and made you popular and told me how he had cut himself with his father's hunting knife when they were in Alaska. He put his left leg up onto the table and pulled back his pantleg to show me the long scar running along the side of his calf. It was at least five inches long. Ryan said it took forty-three stitches to close up, and had hurt like hell with the lid off. He told me of all the people he had known who had stitches, recounting accidents and all kinds of bloody mishaps. I started to feel sick as he described gaping wounds and severed fingers.

"There was this guy I heard at the base who got his dick like almost chopped off in an airplane propellor."

"His dick?" I asked. "How'd he get his dick in a propellor?"

Ryan was about to give me an explanation when the door opened and a skinny Mexican man in a light blue suit came in carrying a clipboard. I couldn't tell if he was a policeman or not, because he wasn't wearing a gun, and because I had never seen a Mexican policeman before. The man stood near the table writing on the clipboard with a mechanical pencil, ignoring us. Finally he looked up and smiled. His pockmarked face was dimpled like a golfball.

"Hiya boys doing?" he said. He didn't have the slightest trace of a Mexican accent.

We said we were doing okay. The man asked us our names and checked them against the clipboard. When I said my name, the cop doublechecked his board.

"You look familiar," he said. "Your old man runs the Chinese restaurant. Yeah, I seen you there. How's it going? Feeling okay?"

"Fine."

"Good, good." He pulled up a chair and sat at the table. "My name's Delgado, boys. Sargeant Sam Delgado. I just want to ask a few questions is all."

"Don't we get phone calls or anything?" Ryan asked. He tried to act cool, but I could tell that he was afraid.

"Who you want to call?" Delgado asked.

"My parents," Ryan said.

"Already called them for you. They're on their way."

"Oh."

Delgado turned to me.

"Your old man's been called and he's coming down."

My throat tightened. "Yeah. Okay."

"So," Delgado said, "you guys had a little excitement today, huh?"

Neither of us said anything. Delgado turned to me and I looked him in the eye as long as I could. I wasn't very good at stare-outs. I clenched my fists under the table until I felt my nails dig into my palms. His eyes bored into me and he nodded and then smiled. I felt as though I would split in two. Part of me wanted to talk, but he was a policeman, and my allegiances as a kid were with my friend and with myself. Still, my father had always told me to respect the police. We were dependent on them to watch the restaurant when it was closed, that's why he gave them free lunches on Wednesdays. They were on our side.

I was losing the stare out, but I couldn't look away. I couldn't even lower my eyes. It was like the stories we heard in school. I was a bird and he was the snake.

"So," Delgado said suddenly, loudly, "it was your house, uh, Mr. Chen?" He cast a glance at the clipboard. "Your house that you guys were playing around in?"

"Yeah," I said.

Across the table, Ryan cut his eyes at me, tightening his face.

"So you were playing around, burning stuff?"

"It's my house," I said.

"And so you guys were, what, just setting things on fire?"

I didn't know what Delgado was waiting for me to say. Ryan didn't want me to say anything. That's what you were supposed to do with cops, he had told me once. You didn't say anything. Nothing you could say would turn out right. They'd confuse you and make you say the wrong thing, or they'd take what you said and twist it around. He knew about this kind of stuff. I shrugged.

Delgado laughed.

"Hey, guys, it's not like we're going to put you in jail or nothing. We just want to know, you know, for the records. We got a fire, we got to write something down. You know, the fire department's gonna tell us what they know, how the fire started, stuff like that. We just want to know what you have to say." He looked at the clipboard. "Ryan. You live across the street. You came over to Rory's here and you guys had some fun? Is that it? Hmm?"

Ryan's chair was pushed back from the table. He sat leaning forward, his hair forming a curtain in front of his face.

"You got a cigarette?" he said.

"Kind of young to be smoking," Delgado said. "What do your parents say?"

"They don't care."

"Yeah?"

Ryan sat up, jerking his head and sending his hair flipping back over his shoulder.

"Yeah."

Delgado pulled a pack of cigarettes out of his coat and held it toward Ryan.

"Menthol," he said.

"Whatever."

Ryan took the pack and shook out a cigarette. Delgado lit it for him with his lighter. Ryan took a deep drag, leaned back in the chair and blew out the smoke.

"You a lighter man or a match man?" Delgado said. As he spoke he turned toward me and held the pack out. I shook my head.

"Zippo lighter," Ryan said. "Lights every time."

"Is that what you use when you're playing around, burning things?"

Ryan made a face, shrugged. Delgado turned to me, smiling.

"So, Mr. Chen, what can you tell me?"

My stomach churned. I could almost feel molecules of air on my head and shoulders, pressing down on the back of my neck. A scream was building inside me. It was either jump up from the table and run or spill my guts.

Someone knocked on the door. Delgado ignored it, kept his eyes on me. He could feel what was going on inside me. He knew.

"Well, Rory?"

"I --"

The door opened and the police department secretary stuck her head in.

"Mrs. Azio," the woman said.

Delgado got up off the table, turned to the door, looked back at me. I avoided his eyes and glanced at the door.

Mrs. Azio stood in the doorway, dressed in a green waitress' uniform. She had just started work a few weeks ago at a restaurant in Barton. She held her purse in one hand and a cigarette in the other. She dropped the cigarette and didn't bother to grind it out as she entered the room. She looked at me briefly and her eyes were blank, as though she had never seen me before.

"You okay?" she asked Ryan.

Ryan looked around for a place to ditch the cigarette, but there was no ashtray and he had pulled his chair up close to the table and slouched under it so completely that he was nearly immobile. The cigarette dangled from his mouth as he said, his voice sounding less confident, "I'm okay."

His mother stood beside him and put her hand on his shoulder. She looked over at me as though I were just a kid she had seen in the street and not

someone who had been in her house practically every day of the week for the past four months.

"So what the hell's going on?" she said, turning to Delgado. "I had to borrow my boss's car to come down here."

"Rory, why don't you wait outside in the hallway," Delgado said.

I silently got up and headed for the door. I tried to catch Ryan's eye, but he was staring at his cigarette.

"There was a fire," Delgado said. "At your neighbors' across the street. Burned half their house down."

"Aw, shit!" Mrs. Azio said.

Her words made me flinch, even though I was accustomed to the Azios yelling and cursing all the time. I stopped at the door, my hand on the knob. Delgado turned to me and motioned for me to keep going. As I stepped into the hallway, starting to pull the door shut, I looked back at Ryan and his mom again and saw Mrs. Azio swing her purse in a wide arc and hit him so hard on the unbandaged side of his face that spit flew from his mouth and the cigarette flipped toward the other side of the room. I closed the door.

A peculiar feeling came over me, like the feeling I got sometimes at school assemblies when the kids up on the stage forgot what they were going to say, or when one of the cheerleaders tripped or fell during a cheer. Other people laughed, but I felt bad for them.

I had been thinking about what was going to happen to me, and I hadn't thought about Ryan. The fire was his fault, after all. He had sneaked back into the garage; he had brought Donny and Brett with him. The fire was Ryan's fault. But I had never seen his mother hit him before. What would his father do?

I sat for a minute on the floor outside the room, hearing the muffled sounds from inside, then stood and pressed my ear to the door. Ryan was trying to talk but was struggling through angry sobs and his mother was shrieking. Weaving in and out of the voices was the sound of Sargeant Delgado trying to calm them down. I couldn't make out what anyone was saying until I heard Ryan's mother snarl at Delgado to "mind your own fucking business" and I stopped listening.

I moved down the hall to the lobby and sat in a cold plastic chair under the yellowed photograph of Ferris' first police chief. Deke Holman was his name and he had a stern look in his eyes and a broad flat nose above his mustache. He kept Ferris in line for 36 years. I sat under his vigilant gaze and waited for my father to pick me up. Motors in the large clock next to Deke Holman's picture purred as the second hand swept over the numbers. I thought about what would happen to Ryan. I imagined his father grabbing him by the hair and swinging him around or punching him. I could hear his harsh, barking voice as he called Ryan a "worthless fuck." Then I thought of my own father again. I saw him at the stove in the China Star, dressed in his apron, smiling as

voice as he called Ryan a "worthless fuck." Then I thought of my own father again. I saw him at the stove in the China Star, dressed in his apron, smiling as he fixed one of his specialties. He would never hurt me. Even if it were I who had burned the house down, I thought. Even if it were all my fault.

After a few minutes Delgado came out to get me and we went back to the room. He had given Mrs. Azio and Ryan a few minutes alone to talk things over, he said, and while they were doing that he wanted to check on a few things with me.

"I just want to make sure that you understand that you're not in any trouble. We just have some questions that need to be answered."

I was leery of him and his wide smile, but I was drained and my limbs felt heavy. I found myself telling the sergeant the whole story, minus the magazines. I told him about Brett and the bottle of gasoline. It was all on film, I said, somewhat proudly. If there was enough light, everything would come out. Delgado nodded and told me that the film was already on its way to the tv station in Barton to be developed. Then he asked me the question I had been preparing for.

"Whose idea was it, Rory? It was your house and all, but who thought of setting things on fire?"

"It was my idea," I said, feeling that the lie was immediately and glaringly apparent.

"Are you sure?" Delgado asked.

"Yes," I said, swallowing hard. I stared Delgado in the eye. "It was my idea."

The door opened then and my father peeked in. The look on his face surprised me. It wasn't anger, but fear. When our eyes met, neither of us said anything. My father looked at Delgado, who stood and shook his hand and explained how cooperative I had been and how I was free to go. We could pick my camera up at the front desk.

My father motioned for me to rise. I got up feeling tired and achy in my bones, in my legs especially, as though I had just jumped off a high fence and landed flat on my feet and with my knees locked. Delgado slipped out of the door ahead of me and then I joined my father in the hallway. He put his hand on my shoulder and gently pushed me toward the lobby. I didn't know what the touch of his hand meant, or how I should respond. I just walked.

"You okay?" he asked.

I nodded, and that seemed to be enough because he didn't say anything else. The hand on my shoulder squeezed once and then slid off.

"I'm sorry," I said, but the words came out so softly I wasn't sure I had spoken them.

"What?" my father asked.

I knew that if I spoke again, if I said anything, it didn't matter what, that I would start crying. I could feel the tears rising in me, so I didn't say anything. I stood to one side as my father picked up the camera. The woman at the front desk looked up at me briefly from her crossword, then returned to her reading. She probably saw kids in trouble all the time.

Delgado had said they weren't interested in exactly who had started the fire, but whether or not we actually had been trying to burn the house down. Since it was an accident, apparently no one was to blame. Still, I felt that I had to help Ryan. Even if it wasn't important to the police whose idea it was, it would be important to Mr. Azio. If my film developed well enough it might be possible to see who was leading everybody, but I would still stick to my story.

We spluttered along in the VW, the cut on my forehead throbbing with each bump. I had never liked the Volkswagen. There was nothing cool about it. It was noisy and cheap-looking and it didn't go very fast. When I got to drive in another year and a half, it would be this that I drove. My father often talked affectionately of the car, how it got good gas mileage and was dependable, but those weren't things you thought about when you were looking forward to driving for the first time. I felt now that we were a spectacle, noisily making our way through town. I glanced at my father out of the corner of my eye. Neither of us had spoken since we left the police station. He was staring straight

ahead, concentrating on the road. He smelled like ginger and soy sauce and garlic.

Then I noticed that we weren't going anywhere; we were just driving around. My father was always a very slow, methodical driver, shifting gears carefully, as though he feared something in the engine would break, signaling turns long in advance, putting the brakes on firmly and deliberately. He did all these things even more carefully than usual as we made our creeping way up and down the side streets of Ferris. We headed for the restaurant, then turned off, started for home, then turned away. My father watched the road, occasionally checking the rearview mirror. An unlit cigarette jiggled in the corner of his mouth.

I wanted him to say something. If he was mad at me, I wanted to hear it. I wanted to hear something and I wanted to talk. When he was upset he would get very quiet, unlike Mr. Azio. My father didn't believe in being wasteful, didn't think what most people did when they were angry accomplished anything.

"I feel sick," I said hollowly.

"Huh?"

"I feel sick, Dad. I'm gonna throw up."

"Okay, okay," he said, but when I looked over, it seemed as though he was just going to keep driving, and that "okay, okay," meant for me to throw up in the car. I leaned my head out the window and spit weakly, the saliva glazing the

Beetle's side, and I saw that we were finally stopping, pulling over at the side of the road at Ralston Park.

I unfastened my seatbelt, opened my door and trotted toward the nearest cinderblock bathroom shack. Inside, faced with the choice of throwing up in the sink or leaning over the filthy toilet, I chose the sink. After I had spit up the last trickle of bile, I dry heaved, the spasms of my body forcing me to stand on my tiptoes and lurch at the sink. When the spasms stopped, I washed my face and went back outside to a water fountain. I gargled and swished and spat until the taste in my mouth was bearable.

My father was sitting on top of the nearest picnic table, leaning over with his head in his hands. I approached him silently and stood a few feet away. His head shot up.

"Hey," he said. "You okay, kid?"

"I kept throwing up," I said. "Even after there was nothing left in my stomach."

"Yeah," my father said, nodding my head. "That happens sometime."

"Where are we going?"

My father stared at the Beetle where he had parked it.

"I guess I'll take you to the restaurant," he said. "Delores can watch you for a little bit. I gotta go take care of things. Lot to do."

I couldn't imagine what there was to do, but whatever it was, it didn't sound like he wanted me along. What I wanted more than anything was to lie down somewhere cool and dark, like the storage room at the restaurant. I didn't know what I would lie on, but Delores would figure something out. She was always nice to me and she was funny.

"Dad?" I said. I wanted to tell him that I was sorry. I wanted to try to explain. I couldn't tell if he heard me, though. He didn't answer. He got down from the picnic table and started toward the car and I silently followed him.

Since it was mid-afternoon and the China Star didn't reopen until five, we pulled up in front of the restaurant, taking the best parking spot. I imagined hundreds of eyes watching me get out of the car and wait as my father unlocked the front door, but when I stepped inside the warm restaurant and looked out the picture window, I saw that the streets were empty.

Delores came out from the kitchen, wiping her hands on a dish towel.

"Good Lord," she said. "What in the hell happened to you?"

I thought I should let my father do the talking, but he didn't say anything.

"There was a fire," I said. "Our house caught on fire."

Delores slapped her hand over her mouth made the sign of the cross, and tossed the towel onto the nearest table. "Ohmigod. Oh, goodness. Oh, Rory!" She hurried over to me and held me by the shoulders as she gently turned me

from side to side. She smacked her gum as she inspected me. "Look at you, look at you. You're just burned and scratched and cut up. Oh, my Lord. Does it hurt, Rory? It must hurt something horrible."

"It's not that bad," I said.

Delores looked up at my father. "What happened?"

I started to turn to look at him, but the tone in his voice as he spoke, the disappointment, froze me.

"Police said they were playing with fire in the garage," he said. "Burning things with gasoline. How do you like that, huh? Burning things with gasoline. Doesn't sound very smart, does it?"

Delores' hand went up to her face again. She made a little squeaking sound as she drew in her breath. "Oh, no," she said. She looked down at me. "I know it wasn't Rory's idea," she said. "He wouldn't think of something like that."

I wanted to say no, that it wasn't my idea. The sound in my father's voice hurt me and I wanted to make him see that I was smart, that I wouldn't do anything like this on my own, but I had already told the police that it was my idea. I had given my word. If I told the truth, Ryan would get the blame and his parents would take it out on him. If I continued to lie, things would be pretty rough on me. Maybe it hadn't even been Ryan's idea. Maybe Donny and Brett had talked him into doing it. But that would be their word against mine and

Ryan's, and they were colonels' kids. Who would believe us? I looked at my father for a second and wanted to tell him everything. Instead, I kept silent. Looking hurt and confused, he turned and walked to the door.

"I got to see about the house," he said to Delores. "Can you watch him till I get back?"

"Sure, honey," Delores said. She gently put a hand on my shoulder. "But what are we going to do about dinner, Frank?"

My father stopped by the door. "We've never been closed, except for vacations," he said. "Not one time. I guess this is the first." He looked at Delores and me. "Better put a sign up."

He went outside and locked the door. To me, the sound of the lock was the sound of something in my life changing.

"Come on," Delores said, taking me lightly by the arm. "Let's go see if we can find someplace for you to lay down and rest."

Delores cleared out some space in the storage room and brought chairs back from the dining room. "This is what we call a poor man's sofa," she said as she pushed four chairs together. "Go ahead, lie down, poor man."

The chairs weren't padded very well but I was glad to lie down. Though my stomach was calmer now, the burns and cuts ached and I felt weary.

"Now you just relax here, honey, and try to get some rest," Delores said. She smiled down at me. "I'm going to be in the kitchen doing some cleaning up. You need anything, you just call for me, okay?"

I nodded. Delores smiled again and blew me a kiss. She always did that to me when there were customers around and it would make me feel hot all up my neck and over the top of my head. Now it wasn't so bad, though. I pretended to catch it.

"Poor little thing," she said and pulled the door almost closed behind her.

My eyes slowly adjusted to the faint light coming under the door from the hallway. The vague glow made the door seem closer than it was, disorienting me in the dark. I closed my eyes. I knew by heart what was in the storage room – sacks of rice, five gallon cans of soy sauce and teriyaki sauce, large plastic bags of fortune cookies, tins of tea leaves, bottles and tins and boxes of ginger and garlic and white and black pepper and hot mustard and other spices, and the colorful calender featuring photos of Chinese entrees from the Chinese food supply company. The cleaning supplies were there, too. I could smell ammonia and the sour odor of an old mophead. All of it made my stomach churn again.

No one had said that I might be in serious trouble, but still the thought of juvenile hall flitted through my mind – long, dark, cold halls, tough kids dressed in gray lurking in shadows, cells with bars, clouds of cigarette smoke, people

getting beaten up. Ryan's brother had once told him about being in juvenile hall in Alaska. You had to be careful in a place like that, he said, you had to watch what you said, not make enemies. The older guys would try to have sex with you. Cornholing, it was called. How corn figured into it, I didn't know. I didn't want to know, either. I pushed the thought from my mind.

I saw the fire again, felt the heat, smelled the burning plastic and wanted to change the pictures I saw. I tried to imagine myself facing down the other kids, kicking them out of the garage. But the scene didn't change, replayed like a movie on a loop, a movie I couldn't edit, and I fell asleep lost somewhere in the smoke and the noise and the flames.

Voices awakened me. I sat up, almost falling off my makeshift bed, frightened in the semi-dark. Then I realized where I was. I saw a section of the hallway, the slice of light on the floor before me, vague shapes against the wall. I smelled the odor of the old mop mixed in with the aroma of spices. I no longer felt weary, but lightheaded and hungry. There was always something left over from lunch in the cooler. I could eat it cold or I could ask my father or Delores to heat it up for me. I didn't feel like using the stove myself.

The voices were indistinct and sounded distant. I stood by the door and listened. I recognized my father's voice, sounding businesslike and low. The other voice belonged to a man, but I couldn't tell who it was. I turned on the

light and looked at my watch. It was after eight. I was surprised that I could sleep that long on a bunch of chairs.

There should be other voices and other sounds, the sounds of the kitchen, of food sizzling in my father's woks, of dishes being washed, the sounds of people eating and talking, of traffic going by as the front door opened and closed. When I got to the dining room and remembered that the restaurant was closed tonight, I felt this caved-in sensation.

My father was sitting at the table nearest the front door, his back to me. He was talking to a tall black man seated across from him. The man was Larrent Davis, a friend of his from the Air Force who was retired, too, and sold insurance. Larrent saw me and gave a concerned smile and invited me over with a wide, flat hand.

"There he is. Come on over here now and let's see what you've done to yourself."

Every few months Larrent would come to our house and talk to my father about insurance. At school functions where parents were invited he was always smiling, shaking hands and writing people's names down in a little address book he carried with him. One of his daughters, Clarissa, went to school with me. I didn't know very much about her because she was a quiet girl. She didn't hang out only with black kids, as most other black students did. Instead her friends were a small group of unattractive, smart white girls. They

all seemed to share the same taste in out-of-date clothes and carried notebooks plastered with Partridge Family and Brady Bunch stickers. Boys rarely asked them to dance at parties.

My father turned halfway in his chair and nodded for me to come over. I joined them at the table.

"Doesn't look that bad," Larrent said. "Let me tell you, I've seen enough fires to tell you that you came out okay. Anybody else get hurt?" I told him what I knew of the other boys' injuries and Larrent wrote in a little notebook.

When I told him Brett and Donny's last names he looked up at me and then at my father.

"The colonels' boys?" he asked.

I nodded.

"What?" my father said.

I waited for Larrent to tell him.

"Yeah," Larrent said. "One of them's the fighter wing commander, the other one runs the 93rd."

The 93rd was my father's and Larrent's old squadron.

"Ah, shit," my father said, looking genuinely pained. "What the hell?"

As a twenty-year enlisted man, he had had his share of run-ins with officers to know that you could never win over rank. Just the mention of the

word "colonels" probably convinced him that we could be in deep trouble.

The golden sunlight made the street outside and the small shopping center across the street glow. I watched a station wagon pull up in front of the China Star. The woman in the front passenger seat rolled down her window and looked at the "closed" sign on the front door. The woman said something to the man driving, frowned at the sign again and then rolled up her window. Kids in the back seat were jumping up and down. The car slowly pulled away.

"What happens now?" my father asked. He shook a cigarette out of a pack that had been sitting before him on the table.

"A whole lot or very little or something in between," Larrent said. My father frowned at him as he lit his cigarette. "It depends on what the parents of the other boys want to do," Larrent said quickly.

My father drummed his fingers on the table. "That doesn't sound too good," he said.

"I know," Larrent said. He scribbled some more on his notepad and sat back, stretching his legs in front of him, loosening his tie. "This is what you buy insurance for, though. If you didn't have insurance and one of those bird colonels sued you and won, you could say goodbye to the China Star. I've seen too many people get messed up, lose everything, over something much smaller than this. People of color don't think much about insurance. Certain kinds, that

is. Everybody always gets life insurance. That's an obligation they feel to their children. But the other kinds? Car insurance? Health insurance? Insurance for their house? 'It'll never happen to me, so why worry?' they say. 'Why spend the extra money?'" He shook his head. "And they wonder why they don't have anything."

What Larrent was saying stunned me. Lose the China Star. I heard the word "sue" and I thought of the lawyers who came into the restaurant for lunch. I knew that suing people was part of what they did, and that it involved money, but the lawyers didn't seem like bad guys. They even left me tips for bussing their tables. Maybe it would be one of the lawyers who came in to eat who would be suing us.

"What happens if they sue?" my father asked. "Do I get a lawyer or what?"

"That's our job," Larrent said. "They're not really suing you, they're suing us. Your name is on the lawsuit, but we defend you." He turned to me. "It was your idea, right? That's what your dad says you told him."

I was surprised by the sudden way the conversation turned back to me. I couldn't think. I just nodded.

"You were taking pictures, is that it?" Larrent asked.

I nodded again, afraid of speaking, of saying too much, or the wrong thing. Now, faced with the prospect of being sued, the idea of defending Ryan didn't

seem like such a good thing anymore. But how could I admit to my father that I had lied?

"We'll just have to see what's on that film when it gets developed," Larrent said. "That'll tell us what we need to know."

"What kind of shit is this?" my father said. I thought he wasn't really expecting an answer, but he was staring at me. "Huh? How did this happen?"

There were many times when my father asked questions just to make a point, but this wasn't one of those times.

"It's just something we've been doing," I answered quietly.

He looked genuinely surprised. "You've been doing this before?"

I nodded sheepishly and looked at the floor.

"Burning things?" my father asked. "Look at me!"

I nodded again, but I didn't raise my eyes.

His open palm caught me at the base of my head and I felt myself jerk forward. His wedding band struck my skull with a hollow snap.

"Look at me!"

I looked at him through tears. My head throbbed, but more than that I was burning and angry with embarrassment and betrayal. He had never hit me before; now he did it here, in the China Star, in front of Larrent. Though he had demanded that I look at him, he only held my gaze for a few seconds before he looked away.

"How long?" he asked, rubbing his face with his hand so hard that his skin reddened under his fingers. "How long has this been going on?"

"Since Ryan moved here," I said quickly. Larrent hurriedly wrote something down in his notebook. My father watched Larrent. I looked away from both of them to the wall. A poster from the Chinese food supply company, a New Year's Dragon, brilliant orange with red-rimmed eyes, was an orange blur through my tears.

"That good or bad?" my father asked.

Larrent held up a finger while he finished writing. He read what he had written and then looked up at us.

"It could be very good or it could be very bad. Depends on what the lawyers do with it."

"What's that mean?" my father asked.

"Well, if this other kid has been the ringleader and he was the one who had the idea to do it today, that would be very good for us. If it was Rory's idea, then it could be very bad. But you never know." Larrent looked at me. "Who's idea was it, Rory?"

I thought I was going to throw up again, but I wasn't that lucky. At least if I got sick I could leave the room and get away from my father's disgust.

Larrent looked at me for the longest time. I was panicked inside, but neither Larrent's nor my father's face showed that they detected my anxiety. I was trying to decide whether I should confess the truth when my father spoke.

"He told the police it was him," he said, louder than he had to.

Larrent raised an eyebrow at me and I hesitated before I nodded back. My throat was tight.

"Well, then," Larrent said, "we'll just have to wait and see what the colonels do. In the meantime, I suggest you stay away from everybody who was involved today. We don't want you saying the wrong thing, anything that could be used against us."

It was dusk now. As we sat at the table talking, several more cars had pulled up in front of the store, only to pull away. My father started to get up several times to go and explain what was going on, but people drove off before he could take a step toward the door. By the time the last car pulled up, he didn't even bother trying to stand. He sat there, cigarette in hand, and just ignored the people who were craning their necks to see inside.

I kept thinking the words over and over: he hit me. I wanted to hit him back. I wanted to hurt him. I opened my mouth to say that it was a lie, that it was Ryan's idea all along. But I didn't say anything. I couldn't tell if that would hurt him, to have his son lie like that. It would probably hurt him more to have to think that I, his honor roll student, had really screwed up. My perceived

stupidity was the only weapon I had against him. It would be a poor reflection on him, he who had always tried to do and say the right thing. In Chinese culture children were supposed to do their best to bring honor to the family. I had done just the opposite, and as I sat there and watched him, I hoped it hurt.

CHAPTER SIX

Larrent had found a place for us to live out on Bellevue Road near the base at the Aloha Estates Apartments, a complex he used for clients like us. The rates were reasonable, although we weren't going to have to pay anything, and the location was convenient. He drove his car over and we followed him, my father and I silent in the Volkswagen. Larrent showed us the way to our second-floor apartment overlooking the pool, opened the door and gave us a little tour and then left us "to get settled in."

The complex was shaped like a large block-letter "C" with a courtyard and pool in the center and dried palm fronds strewn everywhere for atmosphere. At the entrance, where the mailboxes squatted in metal phalanxes to either side of the stone walkway, a bad artist had painted a map of the Hawaiian Islands on the wall above the mailboxes. Hawaii, the Big Island, looked like the head of some kind of dog and the other islands resembled dog turds. The only way you could really tell they were Hawaii was because the artist had written above them, "The tropical paradise -- Hawaii." Another, better artist (or maybe it was the same guy and it was just that he did people better than islands) had painted hula girls here and there on the apartment buildings and thatched huts and a big wave with a copper-colored surfer riding it on the wall across the courtyard from where we were staying. My father had glanced up at the surfer

briefly and grunted as we entered.

The first thing I noticed about the apartment was that the lights in the living room were too bright. When Larrant flipped the switch I had to shade my eyes with my hand. Flying insects appeared and began erratically circling a naked 100 watt bulb hung from the middle of the ceiling. The next thing I noticed was the smell, which was a covered-up raw smell of many people over a long period of time, feet and bodies, spoiled food and diapers, animals. On top of that smell was something half sweet, half disinfectant-smelling. The smell was coming, I discovered later, from the rug, which at first glance looked new, but on closer inspection turned out to be at least ten years old. The third thing I noticed was that the few pieces of vinyl furniture in the living room, a living room suite and coffee table, were set in an odd arrangement, covering large irregularly shaped stains on the carpet. One of them, the one under the sofa, looked like blood, my father said.

The flat sound of voices reflected off water insinuated itself into my dream. I was in the police station, alone. I wandered down the halls hearing the motors in the large clock, but though I heard voices sounding as though they were right beyond the next corner, no one was there. I couldn't hear what the voices were saying, but I knew it had to be about me. I was nearing a door at the end of a hall and the voices were getting more distinct when someone

slammed another door and my eyes opened. I knew immediately that I wasn't in my bed because it was light in the room, and at home my room faced west and was dark until late in the afternoon. Airmen were leaving to go to work and were talking to each other across the pool. I lay and listened to their voices as fragments of their conversations ricocheted up to me. After a few moments I yawned and, rubbing my eyes, started to roll over toward the edge of the bed. I jerked from the pain in my eyebrow and cursed. I gently touched the swollen skin where the stitches had been and waited for the throbbing to stop. The doctor had given me some ointment for the few light burns on my arms and I had remembered to put some on last night before I got into bed. I could still smell it on the bedclothes and on my oily, tender forearms. A kid at school, Ralph Totherow, had a skin condition and always smelled of a pungent ointment. The other kids called him stinky and followed him into the bathroom at lunchtime when he had to apply the ointment. Snatching his ointment tube and playing "Keep Away from Stinky" became a major lunchtime activity until his parents found out and made the school nurse keep it for him. I tried to compare the smell of my ointment with Stinky Totherow's. Mine didn't seem as bad. Still, I would have to put it on sparingly.

As it had at unpredictable moments over the past few days and would for weeks, what had happened to the house hit me in the pit of my stomach like a fist. I sat on the edge of the bed. The pictures ran through my mind and

wouldn't stop until I got up and went out into the kitchen. The air conditioner rattled and hummed above me, puffing out marginally cold air that carried the faint funky smell of the apartment.

My father had already left. He'd written a note saying he had gone to meet with one of the restaurant supply salesman, although I thought he had just left to avoid seeing me. With the note there was a five dollar bill for me to get breakfast since we had forgotten to buy some food the night before. I could eat at the bowling alley, which had a restaurant that served breakfast. I wasn't hungry yet so I left the money on the table and got a glass of water from the tap.

I wandered around the apartment in my bare feet, enjoying the texture of the carpet and ignoring the griminess and the crumbs and bits of dried up food. I tried to dance my way into a good mood, straining to remember a song, a drumbeat, from a television show. I wheeled in circles and kicked my legs, marching up and down the apartment, working up a sweat.

I wound up in my father's bedroom. The closet was open and the clothes he had brought from home were hanging in there forlornly, a couple of shirts and a few pairs of pants. A hatbox sat on the floor at the foot of the bed.

My books were stacked on the bureau. He had managed to pick out some of my least favorites, books I had ordered from the Scholastic book club and which turned out to be cheesy adventure stories for basic and poor readers. Nice try, but there was nothing here I wanted to read. I looked at the books

beneath them. Three of them, at least, were worth reading; one I had read already and wouldn't mind reading again.

I grabbed them up in both of my arms and turned to leave when I saw the hatbox again. It was the size of a large bowling ball bag. Something told me to open it. I put the books down and sat on the floor. The box was full of photographs, dozens of them piled haphazardly upon each other. The pictures were old, I could tell, because many of them had scalloped borders, which I hadn't seen on photographs in years. Black and white pictures, mainly, but there were many color pictures, too.

I saw myself and my father in the pictures on the top of the pile, photos from the past few years, since my mother had left. My father cooked for the local Hawaiian Club as well as the China Star, and many of these pictures were taken at the club's luaus. In one he was wearing a thoroughly stained apron and carving a roasted pig on a spit. Usually the pigs were wrapped in palm leaves and roasted in a large pit in the ground lined with red-hot rocks the size of bowling balls, but this time he had used a spit and an open fire. The pig in the picture was a well-carved mess, large chunks of flesh hanging from its lacerated haunches.

I worked my way down into the pile and moved farther into the past, to pictures full of people and places I didn't recognize. Dark-skinned people were waving from convertibles, flexing muscles on the beach, dancing at

weddings, toasting the camera with beers and wine, cutting birthday cakes, strolling down sunny sidewalks. Then I began recognizing people. There was my father, looking younger, handsome, happy. And there I was myself, a smiling baby, a smiling toddler, a smiling kid. My mother was in most of the pictures with me. She was dark and pretty, slim and with a look of daring in her eyes. In the pictures when I was very young, her hair was reddish and full and she was smiling. As the pictures got more recent, her hair color changed until it was nearly black, and the the smiles slowly disappeared.

As I dug deeper, the pictures changed. I began to see photographs of my mother in costumes, wearing dresses and gowns with feathery collars, extravagant hats, tights and outfits made of fake animal skins, like what the actors in Tarzan movies wore. There were other people in the photographs with her, dark men and women, black people, dressed in similar costumes, posed in dramatic and outlandish stances. My mother lay at the feet of one tall, very black man in one photo, her arms held up as though to protect herself from him. In another she was held aloft by three men dressed in loincloths and marked with white paint streaks on their torsos and faces. In many of the photographs she was dressed in outfits that showed her belly and her legs, which were long, thin, shapely. She was pretty and it was hard to think of her as a mother. I was hard to think of a mother dressing like that and acting the way the pictures suggested.

I wondered where it was she had danced. I figured it had to be in big cities, places where there were nightclubs. There were no such places in Ferris or Barton. Barton had the country club and several bars, and the Base had bars, but there wasn't anywhere people danced on stage. This was another world in these pictures, a place that was bigger, more exciting, than anything we had in Ferris.

She had managed to get away from Onset to see faraway places, to live the way she wanted to live. I wanted some day to get away from Ferris and the China Star, to go to college, to make movies. My father talked of how important it was to get good grades to go to college, but when I talked about wanting to learn how to make movies, he said that it wasn't practical. He reminded me about wanting to be a doctor. But now, after the fire and what had happened in the China Star that night, I didn't want to do what he wanted. I wanted to obey my own blood, that wildness I saw in those pictures of my mother.

I sat back from the box of photos and thought about life away from Ferris. I didn't know anything about what was out there in the world beside the things I had seen on tv or in the movies, so my thoughts turned to the world in the pictures, what I knew of Onset and Boston. Boston was noise and brick buildings and traffic and the vague faces of my grandparents. The Red Sox played in Boston. There was a subway. Cousins of mine lived there. I had nothing concrete to hold on to, no way to put myself there. Onset was no

different. I remembered the crowded beach and the long narrow road that stretched from the neighborhood where we lived to uptown. I remembered cranberry bogs and fish and the smell of salt marshes. I was there somewhere, but I couldn't find myself.

I felt something behind me and turned, expecting to see my father standing in the doorway, but there was no one there. From across the hall I could hear someone diving into the pool again. I took a few pictures from the box that wouldn't be missed, zipped it back up and tried to put it back exactly where I had found it. I slipped the pictures inside one of the books and slid it under my pillow.

I got to the restaurant late to help with lunch. Delores gave me a big smile when I came up front after locking up my bike in the storage room and putting on my apron, but my father wasn't smiling when he saw me.

"You're late," he said, poking his head out from the kitchen. "Where have you been?"

"Home."

"Why are you late?"

"I don't know, I was just goofing around."

He raised his eyebrows at me.

"I wasn't doing anything."

"You go help Delores."

"Okay."

My father had never been suspicious of me before, but since the fire he asked me more frequently about where I had been and what I had done. Since he had hit me, these questions became part of my changed life.

I went up to the table nearest the door, where we usually sat to fill the salt and pepper shakers and the soy sauce containers and folded napkins around chopsticks, knives and forks. Delores was pouring pepper into the pepper shakers. I sat down and started working on the soy sauce, filling the containers from a large metal can.

"How you feeling?" she asked.

"Okay. I got the stitches out yesterday."

"You doing okay in the apartment?"

"It's pretty noisy," I said. "All these airmen stay there and they're always having parties and things. They throw stuff in the pool."

"Wild times, huh?"

"Yeah."

Delores spilled some pepper and mumbled as she swept it off the table with her hand and scooted a small trash can near the table with her foot and dropped the pepper in. She looked up at me.

"What're you looking so daggone blue for?"

I was screwing a top onto a soy sauce bottle. I shrugged again.

"Your dad's probably going to be hard on you for a good long while," she said, "so you'd best get used to it."

I wanted to argue, but not for reasons Delores apparently imagined when she gave me a "don't you dare backtalk" look. I didn't say anything. This was part of taking the blame.

"I know you didn't mean no harm, honey, but just because you didn't doesn't make what happened any less of a terrible thing. You see?"

"I guess," I said.

The words came out wrong, sullen. It had only been a few days and already I was tired of this role. If people would stop lecturing me, offering their wisdom, commiserating, I could feel less beaten down. This was the curse of a small town. There would probably be no bigger news for weeks or months. Until a plane crashed on the base or someone's store got robbed I would be the prime topic of conversation.

What was perhaps even worse was that I had heard nothing from Ryan. I wanted to know what was happening with him. If I was going to feel good at all about taking the blame, I needed to know that what I had done had made a difference. If Ryan's father had given him a beating, then what was the point? His silence seemed to confirm the worst. If he were okay, wouldn't he call me or come by the restaurant?

I finished the soy sauce and started rolling up the utensils, a paper-

wrapped pack of cheap wooden chopsticks, knife, fork and spoon. We kept about a dozen sets of ivory chopsticks for people who preferred them and knew how to use them, but for the average customer, the wooden ones with the splinters were sufficient. Most people used knives and forks anyway.

Someone was knocking on the front door. It was Mrs. Willoughby, a grandmother-aged woman who worked in the small stationery store down the street and came in for lunch once a week. She smiled and waved and mouthed something. Was I okay? I nodded and waved and she waved back and disappeared down the street.

It seemed like most of our regular customers were coming in to see how we were doing and to find out about the fire. We had made the front page of *The Ferris Signal*. People had brought us five or six copies. The picture of our burning house was prominent on the front page. If you looked real hard you could see me off to one side standing next to Kerpich the cop and Mr. Henderson. My father politely accepted the newspapers and stuck them on a shelf in the storage room.

It was common knowledge what had happened, how I had been fooling around with friends playing with fire. I could see in some of the looks people gave me that they were disappointed and surprised that a boy as smart as I was could do such a thing. I was embarrassed for a while, but then I just got annoyed. It wasn't like I had killed a baby or something.

We were almost finished with the shakers and the napkins when a ratty old MG pulled up out front. I watched him through the plate glass window as Reynaldo, Tony's nephew, pulled himself up out of the tiny car and stretched his long legs. He flipped his long hair back over one shoulder with a jerk of his head and drifted to the front door.

"Hey," he said.

"Hey," I said.

"Whatcha doing, boy?" Delores said, eyeing him closely.

Reynaldo was in college in Santa Barbara and came to Ferris for the summers to help Tony with what Tony called his "various business interests." He worked at the restaurant on weekends, and when it got busy for dinner during the week. He wasn't really much help. I always thought he was goofy, but then my father started calling him the pothead and I understood his behavior.

"Hey, Delores."

Delores laughed. "Little early in the day, don't you think?"

"Early?" Reynaldo looked at me and made a face of mock surprise:

Busted! "Looking for Uncle Tony," he said.

"Your uncle ain't here," Delores said. "He's at the funeral in L.A."

"Funeral?"

"His uncle that died? The funeral was today."

"Uncle?"

"Boy, are you going to repeat everything I say?"

"I didn't know there was any funeral or anything. Wow. Who died again?"

"Tony's uncle. That's what he said."

"Huh. Well, he didn't say nothing to me. I was just checking in with him to see what he wanted me to do. Funeral, huh?"

Delores gathered up the shakers and napkins and started to arrange them on the tables. Reynaldo sat down in her chair.

"How's it going, little fireman?" he said, raising his eyebrows and smirking.

My father came out from the kitchen to put something under the register, and of course appeared just in time to hear Reynaldo. "Firemen put out fires, they don't start them," he said. He was wiping his hands on his apron. He looked unhappy to see Reynaldo.

"Fahrenheit 451, Frank," Reynaldo said.

"What's that?"

"Fahrenheit 451, Ray Bradbury, man. You know, the future. The firemen start the fires, you see? They burn books and stuff like that. It's a pretty wild book. They showed the movie a couple weeks ago on tv."

"Hmmmph," my father said. "When's Tony getting back?"

"Getting back?" Reynaldo said.

"From the funeral," I reminded him.

"Oh, yeah. Well, I don't know. I just found out about that myself, you know."

"I thought it was your uncle," my father said.

"I don't know," Reynaldo said. "Maybe it was. But nobody told me."

My father put his hands on his hips, furrowed his brow. He shook his head, turned around and headed back toward the kitchen.

"You need me to, like, do anything for you today, man?" Reynaldo said.

"Yeah," my father said over his shoulder, "run down to the bank and get me my \$50,000."

He went back into the kitchen.

"What's he talking about?" Reynaldo asked.

"The loan money," I said. "We haven't gotten the loan money yet for the new restaurant."

"I don't know anything about that," Reynaldo said. "Nobody tells me anything."

Reynaldo walked over to the front counter, started slapping it with the palms of his hands, beating out a cadence from some song. He looked at me and smiled, hamming it up. "Moby Dick drum solo," he said. "Zeppelin."

I was finished with my napkin chores and got up to get the broom and start sweeping. Reynaldo followed me back into the storage area and pulled his apron down from a hook.

"Might as well get chopping," he said.

"My father's not in a very good mood," I warned him.

"Hey, don't worry, man, I'll mellow him out with some good vibes." He leaned back from me and held his hands out as though he were a magician casting a spell. His fingers fluttered.

I laughed and went back out into the dining room and Reynaldo joined my father in the kitchen.

It was a usual lunch crowd that day, the people from the nearby businesses, a couple of lawyers, airmen from the base. Around one o'clock one of the men from the bank came in, the younger one. I couldn't remember his name, but I knew that my father was getting anxious about the loan and that he wanted to talk to them. I told him about the guy up front.

My father pulled up a chair and sat across from the bank guy, who had ordered a Beef and Broccoli.

"Hey, hiya doin', Mr. Bolton?"

Bolton was at least ten years younger than he, but my father always called everybody Mister or Miss.

Bolton's cheeks were bulging. He smiled, grabbed for a napkin, and pointed at his mouth. He wiped off his chin and then shook hands with my father.

"This is great!" Bolton said.

"It's one of the specials," my father said. "Yeah. Friday is chicken chow mein, Saturday moo shoo pork and Monday shrimp with lobster sauce. We're closed on Sunday."

"Mmmm," Bolton said, taking another bite. "So how's everything going?"

"Everything's fine," my father said. "We get more kids in here for lunch during the summer, so that's always good."

"Over in Barton they let the high school kids out for lunch so they can go home or whatever, so maybe you'll get a good bit of their business," Bolton said.

"We'll be about a half mile from the school, so that's what we're thinking, yeah."

"Must be an exciting time."

My father shrugged. "Well, nothing's happened yet," he said. "We've just been talking, working on our plans. We're thinking everything through on paper, trying to figure out the best way to fit the most tables in."

Bolton looked confused. "I thought you were already doing the renovations," he said.

My father shook his head. "No, no. Not yet."

"Hmmm," Bolton said. "I could swear Tony told me two weeks ago that you were already at work."

"No. See, that's what I wanted to talk to you about," my father said. "We can't get to work until we get the money. I thought you said we could get it in a

few days and now it's been about three weeks."

Bolton was leaning over his plate, eating again. He stopped with a dripping forkful of beef and broccoli halfway to his mouth.

"I did," Bolton said. "And Tony picked it up. He picked it up and then he brought it back the next day and deposited it in your account."

"Huh?" my father said. He was rarely surprised, but he looked as though he didn't know what to say.

"Yeah," Bolton said. "He came back the next day and deposited it. I was there and I did the deposit for him. Don't you remember? You signed the check."

"I what?" my father said.

Bolton didn't say anything. He just swallowed hard, his adam's apple jerking, and my father pressed both of his hands down on the tabletop and half stood.

"I what?"

My father shot up from the table and stood looking down at Bolton. Then, without a word, he walked to the door and went outside. He never acted like this. I followed him, still in my apron, and a few seconds later the door opened and I turned to see Bolton coming after us. I had to know what was going on. I was torn between loyalty to him and the restaurant and a detached sense of spectatorhood. We arrived at the bank.

Bolton looked at his watch. "It's ten past two Mr. Chen," he said. "We're closed until three, then we reopen."

My father tried the doors and found them locked, but there were still people in the bank at the teller's windows.

"So, you got a key, don't you?" my father said.

"Yes, sir, but we can't just let people in when we feel like it."

My father held his finger an inch away from the banker's nose.

"How about when you let people in with forged checks for \$50,000? Can you do that?"

Bolton took a step back from my father and put his hands up. He smiled a quick, wide smile. He was sweating.

"Now, it's a little too fast to say that the check was forged, Mr. Chen. I'm sure there's an answer to this."

"You saying I don't remember if I did something as important as sign my business away? You think I'm losing my mind or something?"

"I didn't say anything like that, Mr. Chen. It's just that the bank has rules about our hours."

"And I got rules about my money!"

My father took a step toward Bolton and Bolton took two steps back toward the front of the bank.

"Maybe I can go in and check it out for you real quick," Bolton said. "You

can just wait here."

"Like you checked things out for me last week?" my father said.

An older man appeared behind the door. He looked at first like he was a customer, but then I saw his three-piece suit. He must have been the boss. The man rapped on the window and motioned for Bolton to come over to him.

"What's going on, Mr. Bolton?" The man's voice was faint but distinct through the glass.

"Sir, I was just on my way back in. This is Mr. Chen." Bolton turned and pointed to my father.

"Yes?" the older banker said.

"He's one of our best customers," Bolton said.

My father stepped up to the door beside him. "Will you cut the crap?" he said. "You tell him I want to get in!"

The older banker regarded my father for a second, then turned quickly to Bolton. "What's the problem?"

"We, ah, we made a loan to Mr. Chen and his partner last month," Bolton said.

"Yes? Go on," the older man said.

"It was a loan for a restaurant in Barton. \$50,000."

My father hit the glass with the heel of his hand.

"I never signed the check! I never signed the check and he says Tony

came and deposited the check!"

The man looked back and forth between my father and Bolton. Behind the older banker the two remaining customers had finished their business and were waiting to be let out. The banker unlocked the door, pushed it open and ushered them out.

The door swung out against my father and he stood aside. The two customers, an old lady and a fat rancher, came out of the bank talking to each other. The rancher turned toward my father and blocked his way. Bolton slipped into the bank and in a second the door was locked again.

"Hey!" my father yelled. "Hey, you got to let me in! Hey!"

Bolton and the older man stood about fifteen feet from the door. Bolton was talking fast and gesturing elaborately with his hands. The older banker stood with his hands on his hips, leaning forward. Every few seconds the older man would turn and look at my father.

At the far end of the street a fire engine turned the corner and rumbled and growled back toward the fire station. We turned and watched the engine slowly roll by. One of the firemen hanging on to the side of the engine raised a hand toward us. I waved back. When I turned around my father started pounding on the glass door.

"Dad," I said. "What's happening? What's going on?"

He didn't reply, he just kept pounding at the door, the thick glass thudding

with each blow.

The older banker stood on the other side of the door and peered at my father. He glanced at me quickly. I recognized him now from my trips to the bank to bring the deposits. A couple of times the man had eaten at the China Star. Delores said he tipped like someone who had money -- poorly.

"You're the cook at the Chinese place," the banker said.

"And owner," my father said. "Half owner."

The banker turned and said something to Bolton over his shoulder, then unlocked the door and stood back for my father to enter. "Let's see if we can straighten this out," the banker said. "Ted Burke." He held his hand out.

"Frank Chen."

We followed Burke across the lobby to his office, which had a large window looking out over the lobby. My shoes sank into the thick burgundy carpet. The furniture was heavy-looking, rich, dark wood. Framed photographs of Burke and other men at various ground-breaking ceremonies hung from the walls. The tellers were busy counting money, and other women who worked behind the desks across from the windows were doing paperwork. Bolton and I trailed behind them.

I knew from the way my father had spoken to him that Bolton had screwed up big time. It was good to see someone else in trouble. My father didn't speak harshly to people without reason. Every once in a while he would scold Delores

for dropping a tray of food, or berate one of the delivery men for bringing him adulterated food. But this was different. This time he was really mad.

My father and Burke went into the banker's office and closed the door.

Bolton folded his arms across his chest and smiled at me.

"You work at the restaurant too?" Bolton said to me. I just looked at him. "You, what, do the dishes or something?"

"Yeah."

I wasn't going to be rude, but I didn't have to chitchat with him. I looked around the bank. I had been in here before, getting change for the cash register, occasionally bringing in the deposit, but it was different with no customers inside and the lights turned down. It seemed cavernous. The raspy sounds of bills being counted, of adding machines tabulating, of coins clinking, floated up and disappeared into the dim vaulted ceiling.

"I worked at a restaurant when I was in college," Bolton said. "I was a busboy."

"I do that, too."

"I didn't like it very much," he said, rolling forward onto the balls of his feet. "That's when I decided I wanted to be a banker and sell people money rather than collect tips."

"Sell people money?"

"That's what loans are. We sell people money. If you want \$100, I sell it to

you for \$105. Get it?"

I did, but I didn't like talking to him. He was too loud. I thought I saw the tellers looking over at us.

I looked in the window in Burke's office. In a large photograph hanging directly behind the massive desk that dominated the room, a man I guessed to be a much younger Burke knelt beside a dead animal, and held one of its horns, while on the other side of the creature, a manly-looking woman held the same pose. The dead animal was some kind of African deer. I had seen something like it on a documentary about Kenya.

"I'll be right back," Bolton said.

He went to the other side of the bank and disappeared into an office. Several of the tellers were looking at me. I recognized them from the restaurant. One of them smiled and waved. I gave her a perfunctory wave back.

I leaned against the door. I could hear my father and Burke talking.

"Your boy was in the paper a while back, wasn't he? Won some kind of award at graduation."

"What?" my father said. "Yeah."

"My granddaughter graduated the same day. I got eleven grandchildren. She's the youngest."

"Aha," my father said.

"How many children you got?" Burke asked.

"Just him," my father said. "Just the boy."

"Bolton's getting the records right now. He'll be in shortly."

"I didn't sign anything."

"Hmmm," Burke said. "That's what Bolton says."

Bolton came out of his office with a manila folder in his hands. He reached out as though to pat me on the head, smiling the smile I was sick of by now, but the hand glided past me to knock on the door.

"Come in!" Burke said, and Bolton entered the office, pushing the door behind him, but it didn't quite close.

"Got everything right here," Bolton said.

My father rose from his chair, but Bolton walked past him, around Burke's desk. My father stood awkwardly with his hands at his side, then put them in his pocket and sat down as Burke opened the folder.

"Let's see," the old banker said.

He flipped through some papers. My father sat leaning forward on the edge of his seat. Burke looked up at Bolton.

"Give Mr. Chen a pen and have him sign his name," he said.

Bolton handed my father a yellow legal pad and took a pen from his breast pocket.

"Just my name?" my father asked.

Burke nodded. My father clicked the pen, carefully signed his name and handed the pad to Bolton. Bolton gave the pad to his boss.

"Looks like a forgery to me," Burke said. "I'm no expert, but this isn't close enough to require an expert."

"Yes, sir," Bolton said.

My father sat back in his chair.

"That's all you need, right?" my father said.

"Unfortunately, no," Burke said. He looked at his fingers again. "As far as the bank is concerned, the money was loaned out in good faith. You and your partner passed our requirements, you provided the proper collateral and you signed the loan documents. Your partner has, apparently, broken the law."

"That's right," my father said. "It wasn't me."

"But the money has still been disbursed to him and to you. We're out \$50,000. And the loan agreement stipulates that you and your partner are jointly and singly responsible for the debt. That's why it was important for both of you to have life insurance: otherwise, if one of you died without protection, the other would be liable for the other half of the loan. So even though Mr. Ramirez stole your half of the money from you, you still owe it to us. And since he's gone, you owe *his* half too."

My father stared at the men. He laughed. "This is crazy," he said. "He stole the money! Why should I have to pay it back? Why?"

"Like I said," Burke repeated, "he stole it from you, not from us. So you have to get it back from him, and we have to get it from you."

"I – I don't even know where he is," my father said, speaking faster. "He's gone. I don't know where."

I remembered what my father had said about Tony going to Los Angeles for the funeral. Was he coming back?

Burke was talking again. I didn't hear the first few words.

"... that we could work something out. I do understand your position. I'll talk to the regional vice president tomorrow and maybe we can suspend the interest payments for the immediate future, something like that."

"Yes," Bolton said, "there are –"

Burke waved his hand and the younger banker stopped speaking. Burke looked at my father as though he expected him to say "thank you," but my father didn't say anything. He got up from his seat and turned toward the door.

"The best thing to do is to find out where Mr. Ramirez is," Burke said. "I suggest you contact the police immediately and press charges. What he's done is a felony. They'll pay attention. The key thing is to get started right away. Fellows like this who steal money start spending it wildly right away. That's the thing you have to do."

I stood back from the door as my father came out of the office. He stopped and looked around the bank. Then he seemed to notice me for the first time.

"Come on," he said. "We got to get ready for dinner."

I looked back into Burke's office, but neither of the men was looking at us. I followed my father. We had to wait at the front door until one of the tellers came over and unlocked it for us. Outside the sun bludgeoned us. We walked back to the China Star side by side. My father shook his head and laughed softly.

"Is this right?" my father said.

He had never paid close attention when I tried to show him how to thread the film through the projector, but tonight he insisted on doing it. He wanted me to check to make sure he had done it right. He had missed threading the film through one part of the machine. For a few seconds the spiteful part of me wondered if I should just say yes and let him try to project the film as it was. I envisioned the film being ruined, but I knew I wouldn't be so lucky. The police had a copy anyway.

"No, you missed a spot," I said and corrected his mistake.

Larrant sat on the dingy sofa, a notebook open on his knees and a pencil behind his ear. He was drinking a beer, taking small careful sips and setting the can down between his shoes.

"I keep trying to track down Mr. Ramirez," Larrant said. "He ought to review his insurance needs. He's a shrewd man with money, but sometimes

those are the folks that overlook their insurance."

"Okay, we're ready," my father said, ignoring him.

The projector was pointed at the bare white wall opposite the sofa. When we bought the camera and projector, screens had been too expensive, almost fifty dollars. "We'll get one later," my father had said, but we never did. It was easy enough to watch movies on the wall.

"You can stop it if I need to see something again for my notes, can't you?" Larrant said.

"Yeah, sure," my father said. "Right, Rory?"

I was standing by the light switch. I nodded.

"I want to make sure I don't miss anything," Larrant said.

The fan hummed and the motor whirred and the film started clicking through the projector. I groaned and leaned against the wall. I felt the hotness in my head, the paranoia, the knot in my throat. I wasn't worried about the footage of the fire. I had told my father and Larrant the truth about what had happened, except for whose idea it was. It was the "hunting trip" I had taken with Ryan that I was anxious about.

Ryan's silhouette scrambled up the canal bank. The camera tilted crazily as I crawled up behind him. Even though the sun had been low in the sky, everything was overexposed because we had been heading west most of the time. When the canal turned north, things lightened up and Ryan became

recognizable. He pointed offscreen, fired the bb gun, picked up rocks and flipped them into the water. I imagined I could hear the sounds of his sneakers scuffling along in the dust, the plink of the rocks he threw.

Then he came to the tree. At first it was hard to tell what he was doing, but when the adult blackbirds fell from the tree, Larrent made a disapproving sound.

I watched silently as Ryan slaughtered the birds. Larrent cleared his throat and my father made a sound in the dark. I wanted to tell him that this happened before we had our talk about the birds, but I didn't think my voice would penetrate the darkness .

Then came the burning. I looked down at my feet and listened to the clicking and humming of the projector. I looked up when I heard Larrent say, "Hold it right there, could you, Frank?"

At first glance the image looked like some kind of abstract painting, an explosion of color at the center with another line of color arcing off to the edge of the frame into the darkness. This was the moment when the fire had traced back up the spray of gasoline into the dishsoap bottle.

"Okay, go ahead," Larrent said, looking up from his notebook.

My father started the projector again. The camera stayed trained on the burning mass in the center of the screen for a second, then turned to the left just as a fireball erupted and the camera's automatic exposure closed the

shutter down. The result was a shot of brilliant light, then darkness.

Then we were watching the house from the street as it began to burn in earnest. I felt a knot of anguish as I saw the flames consume the garage, but there was another feeling, too. Disappointment. The film looked all jerky and dark. The shot outside only lasted about forty seconds, but since it was a single shot, it seemed longer and I felt silly for how I had just focused on the fire and nothing else. You couldn't tell from the film how many people had been standing around watching or how many fire engines had answered the call. You wouldn't be able to tell whether this was a house in a neighborhood burning or an old abandoned place out in the country. Since it had been mid-afternoon, the bright sun had overexposed the film, making the scene dark as well. My footage of the most dramatic thing that had ever happened in my life was just plain bad, worse than all the silly stop-action things I had done with G.I. Joes and clay figures.

Then the screen went white as the last foot of film flipped out of the machine and flapped around on the takeup reel.

No one spoke. I wanted it to stay dark so I could just slip away. Disappear.

"Turn on the lights," my father said.

I flicked on the light switch. Larrent got up and stretched and went into the kitchen. I could feel my father staring at me, but I didn't look at him.

I packed up the projector and stowed it in the hallway closet. My job was done for the evening. My father didn't invite me to stay with him and Larrent in the living room, so I got a soda and went to my room. I sat on the bed and tried to read a book, but I couldn't concentrate on it. Not knowing what was going on gnawed at me. I read the same paragraph three times without understanding anything, then put the book aside and crept to the door and opened it a crack. I heard my father and Larrent, but I could make no sense of what they were saying. I heard the pop top of a beer snap.

I remembered a scene from a tv movie when a character had stood on a chair under an air conditioning vent and heard someone's conversation in another room. The vent was in the ceiling over the door. I didn't have a chair in the room, so I stood on the very corner of the bed, almost five feet from the door, and listened carefully. I heard the same indistinct droning as before, this time sounding more hollow and flat. The only clear thing I heard was Larrent saying "liability" several times. I stood on tiptoes, leaning toward the vent, feeling the cool air chill my face, until I started to get a cramp in my legs and had to sit down.

I turned off the lights and tried to sleep. In the dark I was suddenly afraid as I hadn't been for a long time, not even since the fire. At least after the fire I knew what was happening. My father was mad, but nothing terrible was going to happen to me. Now I just didn't know what was going on and how it would

affect me. So I tried to pray.

The only prayers I knew were the prayers I had been taught to memorize -- the Our Father and the Hail Mary. I said those now, earnestly, out loud, sending them up through the darkness to God. I said them until the words ran together and meant nothing. I had no idea what I was asking for. I just wanted things to get better, for the trouble we were in to go away. I couldn't picture what would be necessary for things to return to normal. Money. The problem was money. If Tony came back with our money, everything would be okay.

Then I started thinking that if only my father would stand up to people, maybe this wouldn't have happened. If he had taught me to fight back I could have stopped Ryan and Brett and Donny, even if their fathers were colonels. If he were like other fathers, he could have stopped Tony from stealing the money. Maybe being like Mr. Azio wouldn't have been all that bad.

I was floating on the edge of sleep when I heard my father talking to someone on the phone. "Frank," he said emphatically, several times, as though the person on the other end were hard of hearing. "Frank Chen," he said. There was a pause. "Your son-in-law."

He must have shifted his position, moved into the kitchen with the phone or something, because that was all I heard. I got up and stood by my door and strained to hear his end of the conversation, but it was a Friday night and

sounds from all over the complex were echoing in the courtyard and off the pool, shouting, music, cars gunning their engines in the parking lot. I slowly opened my door and went down the hall to the bathroom, where I stood in the doorway and listened.

My father was talking in a flat, expressionless voice.

"... bad enough that we -- yeah, the front part. We can't stay there. No, no. Just some cuts and a burn. Yeah. An apartment. Mm hmm. It's temporary, couple of weeks, maybe a month. Sort of. And then there's the restaurant. Yeah. What? Yeah. Chinese food. Yeah. Me. We do okay. There's some problems now. Right."

I moved down the hallway along the wall, into the bright living room. I stopped at the end of the wall, just around the corner from the small dining area where my father had now moved with the phone. I heard him sit down on one of the cheap dining room chairs.

"Everybody's fine. It's just that everything's kind of up in the air right now, you know? Some business problems, and the house. What? No, just a thing with my partner. No, I'm not asking you for money. I understand. I want -- I want you to take Rory for a while. Until things settle down, until the house is back up and I get back on my feet with this business thing."

Take me? That hot surging sensation in the pit of my stomach I had gotten to know so well over the past few days bloomed again and rose up into my

throat. Take me. It made me sound like a thing, a package. Take me where? To Boston? The city. I had been back to Boston only once since we had moved to California, eight years ago, for my grandfather's funeral. I didn't remember much from that visit, just the inside of my grandmother's house, the smell of food from after the funeral, how it was crowded, hot and stuffy with people.

He couldn't send me away, not now. This was when families stuck together, when there were problems. He had always said that the China Star was ours. I needed to stay here to help.

Then I remembered my thoughts earlier in the week, my fears of being trapped in Ferris, of becoming a cook in the restaurant myself and watching people come and go. That's not what I wanted. I didn't want this boring life. My family, my real family, did exciting things. My mother had been a dancer. My grandfather had been a deep sea fisherman who sailed out into the Atlantic Ocean and battled Nor'Easters. There were other things I couldn't remember specifically, but I knew that there was adventure on my mother's side. Things happened in cities. You only had to watch tv to know that. Things I could shoot with my camera. Things with girls. Sex, even. I could feel my pulse quicken in my ears, as though my blood were responding to something across the continent.

My father stepped around the corner, the phone still in his hand, and saw me listening. It surprised us both.

"— cost you anything," he finished saying. He frowned at me and pointed to my room. I didn't move. "No, nothing. I'll take care of everything. I know. I know. Okay. I'll call the airline. I'll make the arrangement."

I stood there until he hung up the phone. He ignored me while he searched through the refrigerator for something to drink and then sat down at the table with an opened orange soda. He lit a cigarette.

"It's not polite to listen to other people's conversations," he said. "But I guess when you burn down houses, you don't care about the rules."

"I heard you talking about me," I said. "I heard you talking to my grandmother."

He took a drag off the cigarette and exhaled through his nose.

"You're going to go live with her for a while," he said. "There's too much going on right now. The house, the restaurant. I don't have time to be worrying about you and wondering where you are. And what you're doing."

I shrugged and looked at the floor. "I'm tired of that old stinky restaurant anyway," I said. "I always stink like garlic and food."

"Just like me, huh?"

"I'm not Chinese," I said, louder. "I don't want to be a Chinese cook. I don't want to live in this town the rest of my life. I'm tired of people making fun of me. I don't care if you send me to Boston. I don't care if I stay there all summer."

I know now how those words hurt him, but the at time I took his silence and

the dark look on his face for anger. I faltered for a second, afraid of being punished for disrespect, but something had happened just now, some switch had been thrown inside me and I wasn't the same anymore.

"I don't care if I never come back," I said. "I don't care if I never see you again!"

He stood up and pointed at me.

"Go to your room!"

"No!"

"Go to your room!"

"I don't want to!"

I wasn't thinking about what I would do. I was dressed in my underwear and a t-shirt. There was nowhere to go but the kitchen or the living room if I didn't go to my room. But I liked the sound of my voice and I liked the way my chest and head felt as I yelled back at him, the pressure and tightness.

He slammed the can on the table top. A geyser of orange soda shot out and onto the table.

"Don't yell at me!" He stepped toward me and pointed again.

"Why not?!"

"Because I say so!" he said.

"I don't care! You're not my father!"

I thought he would hit me then. His arm came up and he shifted his weight

as though to draw his hand back. But he stopped and just stared at me, his face hard and trembling. The rigid contours of his face relaxed and his arm slowly lowered.

My anger was gone and instead I felt suddenly tired; the warm adrenaline sensation dying. I wanted to take the words back, but I didn't know what to say.

"It's late," my father said softly. "Long day tomorrow."

He turned and went to the sink and ran some water over his cigarette.

When he turned around I couldn't look him in the eye. I stared at the can on the table as he walked past me and down the hall. He told me goodnight before he closed the door, but I couldn't find the words to answer him.

CHAPTER SEVEN

I followed the other passengers down the ramp to the hot tarmac. I carried no bags, but I felt burdened and my legs were leaden. My father had awakened me at three that morning and we had driven in silence the two and a half hours it took to make the seven a.m. flight from San Francisco. "Try to sleep on the plane," he said before I boarded the jet, but whenever I checked my watch after dozing off I found that my eyes had only been closed for five or ten minutes. I couldn't sleep, but I couldn't read the book I had brought either. I listened to the sound of the engines and drifted through daydreams I couldn't remember minutes later.

In the terminal faces swarmed around me like mayflies. Someone jostled me from behind, a grown man in a business suit who pushed me and almost knocked me down. He moved past me murmuring an "excuse me," in order to give his big fat wife a big fat hug and a kiss that I could hear from ten feet away. People chattered to each other in foreign languages. Babies were crying. I felt dizzy and sat down on a chair in the waiting area.

My grandmother was supposed to be here to pick me up at the gate. Last night my father had rummaged through his old photos to find a picture of her for me to bring. The only one he found was from the '40s. It showed two women and a man sitting at a booth in a restaurant or bar. There were bottles of beer

on the table and the women, who were brown-skinned like my mother and I, were smiling and leaning in toward the man, whose arms were draped on both of their shoulders. He was white and had a thin mustache, like an oldtime movie star. The women were pretty and looked like sisters. My father couldn't remember for sure if they were. The one on the left, who was shorter, had a mischievous smile and my father said she was my grandmother. I had the picture with me. I took it out and looked at it again, then scanned the crowd. There were several older dark-skinned women walking up and down the terminal, but it was impossible to tell anything based on the picture. Since we had sent her my school pictures every year, it would be easier for her to recognize me.

I waited. The crowd thinned. Soon the only people in the arrival area were sitting in chairs reading or dozing, waiting to get on their departing plane, a flight to Chicago that would not leave for another two hours. I looked at the clock next to the message board. Six o'clock. I checked my watch and felt panicky for a second when I saw that it read three. Did my father tell her to pick me up at Boston time or California time? Maybe she had been here at three and had already left. I reset my watch.

The stewardesses from my flight came through the double doors pulling their small suitcases on little handcarts. There were five of them altogether. I stood up and hoped that one of them would look over at me and see that I

needed help. The stewardess who had worked in my section glanced over and waved at me, smiling. But she kept walking down the hall with the others, the cart following behind her on wobbly wheels like a little unsure puppy.

I walked around in the waiting area. I could call my father, but I didn't want to seem weak or lost. I stood at the railing at the edge of the waiting area, looking up and down the hall, and kept checking my watch. That's what characters in movies did when they were waiting, especially in an airport.

Across from the gate there was a bank of pay telephones against the wall. My father had written my grandmother's number down on the back of the photograph. I fished in my pocket for a dime, but I didn't have any change. Several gates down the hall I saw a newstand.

The man behind the counter at the newstand was very tall and very black. Long diagonal scars along his cheeks made his oblong face look even longer, and his teeth were pointed, as though they had been sharpened. I cautiously held toward him one of the twenties my father had given me.

"Could I have some change, please?"

"No change," the man said in a high-pitched accent.

"What?"

"No change, man. You no understand English?" He pointed to a hand lettered sign above his head. The sign read: "No Chang."

"I need to call my grandmother," I said.

"No change," the man said, and pointed to the sign again. He turned and pointed to a display case of candy behind him. "Buy some candy, man."

I sighed and looked over the rows of candies.

"Cherry Lifesavers," I said.

The man set a pack of cherry lifesavers on the counter. I gave him the twenty dollar bill and the man gave me my change back, short one dollar.

"This is only eighteen," I said. The man stared at me as though I had said that lint was my favorite food. "This is only eighteen dollars," I repeated. "You owe me a dollar."

He made a hissing sound and punched the button that opened the register. He handed the last dollar to me, muttering under his breath. I picked up the Lifesavers and put them in my pocket. The man said something in his own language and waved me away. I felt like flipping him off, but I didn't want to mess with those teeth.

I went back to the phones, but they were all being used. I turned around and watched a crowd from another flight draining away from the gate, heading down the hall in the opposite direction. Above their heads was a sign that read "Baggage Claim." I had been waiting over half an hour. I didn't know what would happen to my suitcase if I didn't claim it soon, so I followed them.

A crowd milled at the luggage carousel, where a sign listed two other flights ahead of mine. I recognized a couple of people from my plane standing on the edge of the crowd.

I started chewing my Lifesavers and watched the people. There were girls everywhere. I watched them grabbing their luggage, shouting to friends and husbands and fathers to grab their luggage, pulling their wheeled suitcases away, chattering to toy poodles and cats in cages. I found a seat and sat leaning forward with my head in my hands.

Then I felt someone standing near me, watching me. I smelled a peculiar smell, odd and familiar. I glanced up briefly and saw two pairs of shoes and two pairs of slacks. One of the pairs of shoes was a pair of old but well-shined wingtips. The other shoes were sneakers, Keds that looked as though they had been salvaged out of a trash can. One of the Keds had a large hole at the big toe and I thought I saw a toe wriggling. It occurred to me then what the smell was and why it was familiar. It was the smell of the men my father would feed at the back door of the restaurant, the smell of wine and stale, weeks-old sweat and urine. Winos.

Two black winos. The taller one, who was dark-skinned and faintly bearded and wore wire-rimmed glasses, looked almost dignified. He was wearing an old suit coat over a Red Sox t-shirt. The colors had run so that the normally white shirt was pink. A small peace sign was pinned to his left lapel.

A thumb-sized cigar butt rested precariously in the corner of his mouth. He was holding something in his hand and squinting at me. It was a photograph.

The other man was shorter, almost my size, and had a wide, loose-fleshed face. He, too, wore a coat with a long-sleeved work shirt underneath that was several sizes too big for him and a black t-shirt under that. His shiny green polyester pants were dotted with pulls and hanging threads and lay atop his Keds in double folds. He smacked his lips together, and when he smiled I saw nothing in his mouth but blackness.

I wondered what they could possibly want with me. The tall man held the photograph up in front of him and squinted at it again, then handed it to his friend, who smacked his lips, looked at it and nodded his head. The tall one spoke.

"You're Rory, aren't you?"

He didn't sound at all like the winos who hung around the alley behind the restaurant. He sounded educated, like an actor on tv. I looked from the tall man to his friend, but didn't say anything. How did he know my name?

"This is you, isn't it?" the tall man said, holding the photograph out for me to see.

It was one of the pictures my father had taken at my junior high graduation. Yes, that was me all right, the mortar board perched on one side of my head. But my attention was focused on the man's thumb, the fingernail of

which was thick, yellow and extended at least half an inch long beyond the tip of his finger. A claw.

"Yeah," I said hollowly. "It's me."

"It's him," the smaller one said, happily. "I remember him, too."

"Shut up, nigger, you've never seen him before," the tall one said.

The smaller one laughed at this, his shoulders hitching up with each twitter. I was sure the smell was coming from him.

"I'm Spider," the tall one said, putting the photograph back in the breast pocket of his suit coat. "This is Charley Brown." He indicated the other man with a wide sweep of his hand.

"That's why everybody always picking on me!" Charley Brown said.

Spider held out his long, long-nailed hand to me.

"I'm pleased to meet you," he said. "Your grandmother sent us to pick you up."

I looked at the hand held out before me and against my better judgment, reached out to take it. I was afraid, but more than that I was confused. Had my grandmother really sent these men? If she hadn't, how had they gotten hold of a picture of me? If she had, why had she sent them? Was there something wrong with her? "I have to get my bag," I said.

"Certainly," Spider said.

The luggage from my flight was arriving on the carousel. The men followed me forward through the crowd until we reached a place where we could see the bags as they came jerking into sight on the conveyor belt. At first people resisted my "excuse me's" and my polite tappings on their shoulders, but then the stink of Charley Brown parted the crowd. "Goodness gracious," I heard a woman say. Another woman, a mother, pulled her young son out of the way and admonished him not to touch the smelly men. I wanted to curl up into a ball, dry up, blow away, die. I kept walking.

When Spider asked me how the plane ride was, Charley Brown said that he was afraid of flying and didn't want to go up in a plane. When Spider asked if the food on the plane had been any good, Charley Brown replied that eating up in the air didn't make any sense. They kept talking like like this until I spied my bag and moved farther down the carousel toward it. I didn't want anyone to think that I had anything to do with these men. I knew that I had to go with them, but I didn't have to carry on with them like they were old friends.

I tried to politely edge my way in among the front line of passengers, but no one would relinquish his place at the edge of the carousel. After my third attempt at excusing myself I just wanted to push people down. I retreated to the back of the crowd.

"They won't let me through," I told Spider. "I need to get my bag."

"What's it look like?" he asked.

"It's black and it's got some duct tape on the side where it's ripped."

"All right, let me see," Spider said, rearranging the cigar butt to the other side of his mouth.

I stepped aside, giving him a wide berth.

"Coming through here, need to get the boy's bag. Excuse me, mister. Hold on there. Coming through." The crowd held fast for a few seconds, then receded in front of the motioning, complaining Spider. "Hey now, coming through! Watch out now, please. No need to push. Hey! Need to get the boy's bags."

I turned and Charley Brown was standing right behind me, smiling. His face was a collection of creases and scars, like a piece of dried fruit. His lower lip, quivering, wet, was grotesque and fascinating. Was this a telltale sign of winohood? Did it quiver faster when he was drunk, or slower? Was he drunk now?

Peeking out of Charley Brown's left coat pocket was a shiny gold bottle cap. I remembered that type of cap from Ryan's father's liquor cabinet. Booze. Wine. Charley Brown's breath was tart with it.

"How old are you?" Charley Brown asked.

"Thirteen."

My answer seemed to please Charley Brown a great deal. He smiled some more. I wondered how old he was, but it wasn't polite to ask an older

person's age, my father had taught me. Even if they were a wino? I wondered. Even if they were a wino, I imagined my father saying.

"That's nice," Charley Brown said. "You look thirteen."

"Thanks."

We stared at each other. I was aware of people watching us. Charley Brown's lower lip quivered and he opened his mouth to speak just as someone yelled, "Sonofabitch! Watch what the hell you're doing!"

Spider was moving alongside the carousel, bent over and scrambling, in pursuit of my suitcase. People in his path were stepping back, leaning away, tripping over their own luggage. A tall red-faced man was shaking his fist at him. Spider finally caught up with my suitcase halfway down the carousel's track and yanked it onto the floor. He hurried back to where Charley Brown and I were waiting for him. Somehow in the scuffling and scrambling he had lost his cigar butt. His previously wavy, pomaded hair was mussed up. Glistening coils and strands pointed in every direction.

"Come on," he said, handing the suitcase to me. "Let's get the hell out of here. I can't breathe in here."

"Yeah," Charley Brown said. "Let's make – let's make tracks."

We made our way out into the muggy Boston afternoon. I nearly gagged on the humid air, thick with exhaust fumes. Spider waved to the first cab at the

curb. The driver leaned forward and looked us over, then nodded and got out of the car. He opened the trunk and helped me put the bag in. He was a bloated, greasy-looking guy who smelled almost as bad as Charley Brown. "Hop in," the cabbie said. Spider opened the door and Charley Brown scrambled in. I looked inside the cab and was dismayed to see I would not be sitting next to the window and fresh air.

"Go ahead," Spider said.

"I need to sit by the window," I said. "I -- I have breathing problems."

Spider frowned and looked into the cab. "My legs are too long to sit in the middle," he said.

The cabbie turned in his seat. "Hey, meter's running," he said.

"What for?" Charley Brown said. "We ain't gone nowhere."

"That's the way it is," the cabbie said.

"Shut up, Charley Brown," Spider said, "and get out so we can change."

Charley Brown scrambled back out of the cab and started walking off to the next cab in line. Spider grabbed his elbow.

"Change seats, not cabs," Spider said. Then he turned to me. "Go ahead and get in."

I ducked into the back of the cab and slid across the cracked vinyl seat. At first all I could smell was the nondescript odor of cab. Then Charley Brown slid into the cab next to me. I turned to the window and held my breath. Dear God.

"Where to?" the cabbie asked as Spider got in and pulled the door closed.

"39 Upton Street," Spider said.

The driver repeated the address, slammed the car into gear and pulled away from curb without looking over his shoulder. I clawed for the window lever, found it and cranked. It didn't move and neither did the window. I tried again. No luck. In front of me, the driver turned slightly to look over his shoulder and shook his head.

"Sorry," the cabbie said. "That window don't go down. Sonofabitch at the garage said it was fixed, but look at it. Just as well, anyway: the pollution in the tunnel is murder. After we get out you're just five minutes from Upton Street anyway."

I shrank against the door, tried pressing myself into it and as far away from Charley Brown as I could. The cab jostled and swerved and the wino leaned against me, giggling.

Then I remembered the Lifesavers. I pulled the two-thirds full pack out of my pocket and held it snug against my nose, breathing in deeply the scent of artificial cherries.

We were descending into a tunnel. I hadn't quite understood what the cabdriver meant when he was talking about the air down there, but I soon found out. Through the opened windows up front, rank hot air flooded the car,

a smell like all the buses parked in front of the library after school magnified tenfold. I groaned and tapped my head against my window.

Charley Brown jostled me with an elbow and pulled the bottle out of his pocket and unscrewed it. It was Mogen David 20/20. I had found such bottles behind the China Star. Once I saw two of the winos out there finishing off a bottle. Grape juice, they told me. Here, have a swig. Charley Brown wiped the bottle top off very carefully and inserted it between his lips. He took several long slow pulls, his Adam's apple jerking.

"Careful now," Spider said.

Charley Brown pulled the bottle from his mouth, wiped his lower lip with his hand and belched feebly.

"You have no manners at all," Spider said, grabbing the bottle from him.

Spider held the bottle to his lips and was motionless, almost statuelike, as he drank. In the dim light I saw the level of the wine decline steadily.

"Hey, now, you can't be drinking in here," the cabbie said. "I'll lose my license if I get stopped."

"All done, my brother," Spider said.

He handed the bottle back to Charley Brown, who fished the cap from his pocket. He looked over at me -- I was watching him intently -- and held the bottle loosely in his left hand. He blinked and considered me, and I considered

him and the bottle. There was no way I was putting my lips where theirs had been.

Shaking his head, Charley Brown put the cap on, screwing it tight, and put the bottle back in his pocket. I turned my face to the window.

We lurched out of the tunnel into a maze of roads and bridges and overpasses. There was no horizon. In Ferris the sky was endless. On clear winter days, after a rain, you could see the Sierras fifty miles away, stretching away into the distance north and south. Your eye became accustomed to long, wide vistas. Here, the foreground was clogged. I kept my face pressed to the window, fogging the glass and rubbing away the moisture as soon as it blurred my view. Soot-darkened buildings crowded the sky, and flocks of pigeons swirled through the air like black confetti. In the near distance, towering above the shorter brick buildings, a handful of skyscrapers and the skeletons of new ones under construction glowed orange in the late afternoon sun.

"Cabdriver!" Spider said. The man didn't reply. "Hey!"

"Yeah, what you want?"

"Hey, man, how far is it to Upton Street?"

"Three, four miles."

"In dollars," Spider said. He leaned forward until his head was pressing against the plexiglass divider separating him from the driver. "How much is it going to cost?"

"Eight dollars," the driver said.

Spider sat back and nudged Charley Brown fiercely with his elbow.

Charley Brown reached into his pants pocket and pulled out a wad of bills and some change. He counted out the money. I counted it, too.

"Seven dollars, forty-two cents," Charley Brown said to Spider.

"Six," I said. The men turned to me. "Six," I repeated. "It's only six dollars."

Spider rubbed his face with his hand, the large scimitar of a fingernail flashing dangerously close to his eye. He leaned toward the partition again.

"Cabdriver!"

"What?"

"How far can we go for six dollars and forty two cents?"

"What are you, pulling my leg or something? How the hell I know?"

"You know how far eight dollars go," Charley Brown said, "why can't you just subtract?"

"Lord have mercy," the driver said, shaking his head. "Why me?"

"How far?" Spider persisted.

"I'll let you know," the driver said.

Spider sat back and winked at me and fumbled through all of his pockets until he found what he was looking for, yet another cigar stub. He produced some matches and struck one repeatedly before it caught. A few seconds later I gagged on the smoke from the cheap cigar.

The cabbie pulled over to the side of the road. Spider leaned forward and looked at the meter.

"Hey! Shit! Eight dollars?" he said. "We told you to stop before that!"

"There was traffic," the cabbie said. "I lost track. Eight dollars."

"We don't have eight dollars," Spider said.

Charley Brown was fidgeting and wringing his hands together. He leaned forward too. "What, what you trying to do? You trying to cheat us?" Charlie Brown said.

The cabbie spoke without turning to look at them. "Me cheat you? What the fuck, you a comedian or something? I'm giving you ten seconds to come up with the money, or I'm calling the cops. And you know how much they love you coloreds. One, two, --"

Spider grabbed the money from Charley Brown and shovelled it into the small metal drawer in the partition. The cabbie plucked the money from the drawer and counted it.

"A dollar, fifty-eight cents short," he said disgustedly.

"We know that, that's what we told you," Spider said.

"Let's see, what am I on now? Six, seven --"

"I ain't going to jail," Charley Brown said, squirming, but he didn't move. I could see his lower lip quivering, and a sheen of sweat glistening on his brow.

"Why you doing this?" Charley Brown asked. "Because we black?"

"Listen," the cabbie said, "if you was George Wallace you ain't getting out of this cab without the full fare. I got a family to feed. Eight."

"Here," I said, tearing a handful of change from my pocket. I counted out a dollar and sixty cents and put it in the little tray. "That's the rest of it."

I unlocked the door and got out. Charley Brown and Spider slid out the other side.

"And a two cent tip for me," the cabdriver said. "My lucky day. I can put my youngest through Harvard."

"I need my suitcase," I said.

"Yeah, yeah."

The cabbie got out and unlocked the trunk. "What the hell you doing with them, huh?" he asked. I wanted to answer but I couldn't think of what to say. The cabbie yanked the suitcase out and set it at my feet. Turning to Spider and Charley Brown on the sidewalk, he gave them the finger. "Fucking winos."

The cabbie slammed the door and stepped on the accelerator. The cab lurched away from the curb.

"Come on," Spider said. "We got to get home before the fight."

"The fight?" I said.

"'Tiny' Montrose and 'Crackerface' Williams," Charley Brown said.

"Boxing," Spider explained. "Your grandmother is a great fan."

"Yeah," Charley Brown said, "and when – and when she wins she likes to celebrate. Come on."

An elevated train track ran down the center of the street, large, ugly, imposing, and cars and buses threaded their way around and in between its trestles. There was pigeon shit everywhere. Trains rushed up and down the tracks, clattering and roaring and shaking the sidewalk under my feet. The people passing above me in the trains stared out over the roofs of apartments and shops like mannequins in shop windows.

I knew from tv and magazines that there were parts of cities that were almost entirely Black or Puerto Rican, but I was still surprised. My father had taught me to neither like nor dislike someone simply because of the color of his skin. After all, how would I like it if someone behaved toward me a certain way because I was brown? What my father had failed to do, though, was teach me not to be *afraid* of people because of the color of their skin. My friends at school who picked on Black and Mexican kids when they saw them alone, were afraid of them when they saw them in groups of three or more. It was the same way on television, too. Black people were either slaves or weak ghetto dwellers who got abused, or they were supercriminals who raped women and robbed liquor stores. Now as I walked down the street between Spider and Charley Brown I was almost stupid with fear. People walked past me, talking loudly, laughing, yelling playfully and not so playfully, cursing, singing songs. I

imagined that everything I heard was directed at me. I was brown, but they all knew the truth. I wasn't one of them. It was just a matter of time, I knew, before someone shot me, stabbed me, punched me, kicked me, strangled me, burned me, kidnapped me. Just a matter of time.

Upton Street was only one block long, jammed from end to end with dark red brick townhouses five stories high. Although the buildings were basically the same, I saw as I walked along the cracked sidewalk subtle differences in the colors of the doors, the type and shapes of the windows, the railings on the steps, the frosted or bevelled glass in the front doors. I sensed, too, the life in these different buildings, the different stories going on behind those doors and windows. Some Chinese men sat in plastic lawn chairs under a makeshift parasol drinking orange soda. Black workmen on a scaffold in front of a building across the street were repairing the bricks around a window on the third floor. A large, diffuse group of Chinese kids was playing all along the street. The younger kids were playing some aimless game of tag, while the older kids were lounging on cars, the girls talking listlessly to each other, the boys showing off their martial-arts moves. One of the kids looked over at us as we passed and gave Spider a mock salute. Spider waved him off and all of the kids laughed.

"Here we are," Spider said. "Thirty-nine Upton Street."

I looked up at the front of the building and remembered climbing those steps when my father and I had been here last. And I remembered that my grandfather's body had been placed in his casket in the front parlor, behind the large window to my left as I stood now looking up. The expression people used for what was being done with his body then came to me – "waked." My grandfather had been "waked" in the front parlor. It seemed like a strange word to use for someone who wasn't ever going to wake up again.

I started up the stairs but Spider and Charley Brown didn't follow me. I stopped halfway up and turned to them. Spider was taking a drink from the wine bottle. Charley Brown was smiling.

"Getting rid of the evidence," he said.

When Charley Brown finished draining the bottle he turned casually aside and tossed it into the gutter, where it broke with a loud pop. The sound made me jump. I looked down the street, but no one else seemed to hear.

The front door opened onto a small foyer with a second door beyond that which was locked. Spider fumbled with his key. On the other side of the door I could hear the clicking and clacking of small dogs as they ran down the hallway barking. Through the frosted glass I saw the vague shape of a long hall and at the end another door and a light beyond. An ill-defined shape moved into the light at the end of the hall, then disappeared.

The dogs were yapping and growling and scratching at the door.

"Damn dogs," Charley Brown said. "One of these days I'm going to catch 'em and kill 'em and sell 'em to the Chinese. Them people eats dogs, you know."

"We don't -- " I started to say, but Spider cut me off.

"Anybody touches these dogs they will surely be in a world of trouble," Spider said. "She's liable to sell your old wino ass to the Chinese." He turned the key in the lock and pushed the door open. "Go ahead," he said to me.

"Don't worry about the dogs. They fuss, but they don't bite."

I picked up my suitcase and stepped toward the entrance. I saw the dogs for the first time. They were chihuahuas, small, light brown, ugly with bulging eyes and ratlike snouts. They stood their ground as I entered. The one on the left bared its teeth and lunged for my ankle. I reflexively kicked at it and caught it just under the chin with the toe of my sneaker. The dog yelped, tripped and fell and regained its composure just out of kicking range. I turned to the other dog. It had also retreated back a foot or so. I wanted to kick it, too, and shut them both up. They didn't quiet down, but kept up a steady racket.

I heard someone moving in the kitchen at the end of the hall. To the right of where I stood was a stairway leading up. To my left was the main door leading to the front parlor that I had seen from the sidewalk. At the end of the hall, just before the entrance to the kitchen, was the banister for the stairway leading to the basement.

"Sparky! Doris!" a woman yelled from the kitchen. "Get in here!"

The dogs scampered back down the hall and disappeared into the kitchen. I heard the woman chiding them.

"Sounds like she's mad," Charley Brown said.

"When isn't she mad?" Spider said.

"Is that you, Spider?" the voice yelled down the hall.

"Yeah, Lil. Here I am."

"Did you get him?" She made it sound as though I were a bag of groceries.

"Yeah, we got him."

"What the hell took you so long? Plane got in almost two hours ago."

Spider held his finger to his lips and winked at me. He motioned for me to move down the hall. I started toward the kitchen, the two men carefully staying behind me. "The plane, see, the plane was late," Spider started. "Then there was a problem with the luggage and there was traffic and all that."

I was anxious to see my grandmother, but I was also apprehensive. The voice coming from the kitchen didn't sound like the calm, distant one that had spoken to me periodically over the years. It was sharp and harsh and full of suspicion, a voice that would be hard to live with. I braced myself and pushed the kitchen door all the way open with my suitcase. There was no one there.

Then I heard her in her bedroom, which was just off the kitchen to the left.

Papers rustled.

"That's a lie!" she said.

The two winos crowded behind me. Where I stood I was blocking their entry into the room, so I moved further in, around the kitchen table, and stood near the window. The kitchen was dingy and cluttered. Behind me, as I faced the partially closed bedroom door, stood the washing machine, sink and stove. Both sides of the sink were filled with gray water. The faucet was leaking slowly into the right hand side, where the handles of pots and pans protruded from the water. A black shape floated slowly, aimlessly, among the pot handles. I looked closely. It was a large overturned roach.

A decrepit fan, perched precariously in the opened window, droned and vibrated. Beside it, a large, fluffy cat lay on the windowsill sleeping. The cat twitched and meowed in its sleep and when it turned over I saw that it had only one ear. The table in the center of the room was bare except for an ashtray, a set of salt and pepper shakers in the shape of broken armed windmills, and a can of condensed milk covered with plastic wrap. The formica tabletop was scratched and dented. In the meager breeze from the fan, pieces of ash seemed to crawl up out of the glass ashtray and pitch themselves onto the table, where they slid like ice skaters and disappeared off the edge.

My grandmother was speaking from her bedroom again, words I couldn't hear, sounding as though she were speaking confidentially to the dogs. I heard her shuffling through papers again. The two winos moved aimlessly around next to me. Spider finally sat down at the table.

The bedroom door swung fully open and my grandmother came out, speaking through a veil of smoke.

"A lie!" she said. "I called the airport, to check on that plane. Said it was there on time!"

She didn't look anything like I remembered and definitely nothing like the picture I carried. She was old, but she didn't have any gray hair. It was dark brown and it was long and wavy. She was dark, darker than I, and her face was long and puffy, as though from lack of sleep. The glasses she wore on the tip of her narrow nose were held together on each side by rubber bands and masking tape. She had a mole on the left side of her face between her cheek and the corner of her mouth. Although it was almost eight o'clock in the evening, she was dressed in pajamas and fuzzy slippers. In one hand she held a cigarette and in the other a tall glass filled with ice cubes and water. Despite the anger in her voice, she was smiling. She looked at me, took a sip from her glass, then turned to Spider.

"Huh?" she said.

Spider squirmed.

"Like I said, Lil, there was traffic."

"Lying! No good sonofabitch wino! Lying!"

She turned to me and winked. She laughed and pointed at me with the glass in her hand. "Good-looking boy, ain't he?" she asked. She glanced at Spider. "Huh?"

"I seen him right away and recognized him," Charley Brown said. "I knew him right from the picture."

"Yeah, he's a handsome young fellow," Spider said. "Reminds me of you, Lil. Got the same family features. He's Johnny's boy, isn't he?"

"Johnny's boy, shit. Laura's boy. My girl, Laura."

I was still holding my suitcase. I leaned over to put it down. As I did, something brushed my leg. I jumped, immediately thinking of cockroaches climbing up my pants. The one-eared cat looked up at me and meowed hoarsely.

"That's Jimmy," my grandmother said. "You like Jimmy? Jimmy, Jimmy, Jimmy; come here, Jimmy."

The cat looked at her with indifference. Instead, the dogs came scrambling out of the bedroom all clacking toenails and yelps. My grandmother swatted at them and shooed them back into the bedroom. She tried a few seconds more to get the cat to come to her, then gave up.

"Cats is like little people," Charley Brown said. "They do what they wants to do. Sometimes they little sons of bitches."

"Like some winos I know," my grandmother said. "Don't think I'm forgetting about you being late. You probably used that cab money on wine then took the bus home."

"We didn't take no bus," Spider said. "Ask Rory. He'll tell you."

My grandmother turned to me.

"We didn't take the bus," I said. I was mad at Spider for involving me in this lie, but I reasoned that it wasn't really a lie. We had indeed taken the cab. "We took the cab."

"Huh," she said, draining her glass and taking the last drag off her cigarette. She set the glass down on the table, pushed the glasses back up to the bridge of her nose and looked at me again. "Your father said there was trouble back home. Said there was a *fire*, a fire in the house." There was something unusual about the way she spoke, but I couldn't figure out what it was. She had a Boston accent, but it wasn't only that. She left words out, emphasized others you wouldn't think needed to be emphasized.

"I don't want to hear about no fire," Charley Brown said. "I been in a fire once."

"I know what fire that was, too," Spider said, laughing. He looked over at my grandmother. "Nigger lit his cigarette and then put the burning match in his

pocket. He was so high he didn't know he was on fire until somebody started stamping on him to put him out!"

My grandmother snorted. "I heard that story more times than Carter's got little pills. Who wants to hear about some wino setting himself on fire? This is real *life*. This is a real *house* catching on fire."

I was sure my father had explained things to my grandmother, so I didn't know why she wanted to talk in front of Spider and Charley Brown. It wasn't any of their business.

"He said he wanted to send you away until things got settled down," she continued. "Said he wanted to send you here. `Here?' I said. `What's he going to do here in this old dirty stinking city?' He said `Visit, get to know you.'" She snatched her glass up from the tabletop. I heard the ice cubes slip and clink against the glass and she made a strange noise with her mouth. "Pssshhht. I'm your grandmother. What's there to know? But that's what he wanted to do. So." She shrugged.

As she spoke Charley Brown had begun fidgeting at the other end of the table, putting his hands in and then taking them out of his pockets, rubbing his fingers along the table top, shifting his weight from foot to foot. He was now humming to himself. My grandmother crossed the kitchen to the cupboards above the sink, stepping around me and my suitcase, and stopped suddenly, her hand on the handle of one of the cupboard doors.

"You don't stop humming and jumping and shit, I'll set you on fire myself."

"Sorry, Lil. I was just thinking about, you know, getting that money for going and getting him."

My grandmother opened the cupboard door and reached in. She pulled out a half full gallon jug of Gordon's gin and refilled her glass. I recognized the bottle from Mr. Azio's cabinet. She left the jug on the countertop and sipped from the glass. I knew it was much stronger than the sloe gin we drank and I didn't like the taste of it. At least, I thought, that's one thing that doesn't run in the family.

"No one asked you to go," my grandmother said to Charley Brown. "I asked Spider to go. Why do I need to send two winos to go pick up one boy?"

"You know we always goes together," Charley Brown said and then quickly added: "I carried his bag."

I nodded when my grandmother looked over at me to confirm this. She regarded Charley Brown for another few seconds. "So?"

"So I should get something. Right, Spider?"

"I'm not saying anything," Spider said. "You can negotiate your own deal."

My grandmother reached into her pajama tops and pulled out a crumpled wad of bills. She peeled off three ones and handed them to me. "Here, give these to Spider."

I did so. Spider snatched them from my hand and nodded. Charley Brown looked on expectantly.

"Here," my grandmother said again. "Give these to Charley Brown." This time she handed me two bills. I handed these over as well.

"How comes I only get two?" Charley Brown asked.

"Because no one asked you to go and because you can still get a bottle of Ripple and have change left over. Now get out of my face before I take it back."

"But still," Charley Brown started.

Spider grabbed his arm and silenced him. "Shut up while you're ahead. We'll put it all together and get three bottles. Now, come on." Spider was on his feet and herding Charley Brown down the hallway as he spoke. "We'll be seeing you later, Lil."

"The fight's at nine. Don't be coming in late and making noise."

"Right," Spider said, then turned to me. "See you, kid."

I waved to them as they hurried out the front door. I turned back to my grandmother, who was now on the threshold of her bedroom.

"Come on," she said. "I'll show you where you can sleep."

I picked up my suitcase and followed her into her bedroom. Her bed was on the right, flanked by a tall metal wardrobe on one side and a nightstand topped with a fan on the other. Against the left wall there was a large dresser cluttered with knickknacks, papers and small boxes. Above the dresser perched

a large mirror, with photographs and prayer cards stuck in the frame. I saw myself in one photograph. In others, Jesus and various saints looked down at me. Jesus, in the dim light, looked distressed, as though he, too, was just now learning what I was learning. I lugged my suitcase in, keeping a lookout for the dogs scurrying along the floor.

My grandmother turned on the light and led me into the room on the other side of the bedroom. The living room was immense, the ceiling nearly twice as high as our ceiling at home. Shapes and figures had been carved into the molding, but they were barely visible through thick layers of cobwebs. Sheet-covered lumps filled the room. There were lumps that looked like chair-lumps, and lumps that looked like sofa-lumps. In the middle of the wall on the right was the largest fireplace I had ever seen. As my grandmother led me past it, I measured myself against it and figured that I would only have to crouch a few inches in order to stand inside it. There was no grate or screen.

My grandmother shuffled in her slippers to a long, wide lump at the far end of the room. Behind the lump, two tall, narrow windows looked out over the sidewalk and the street. I saw the bobbing heads of two kids as they raced past the house.

"This is where you can sleep," my grandmother said. She pointed to the bedsheets stretched over the lump. "Go ahead."

I set my suitcase down and grabbed the sheet at the left end of the lump. I pulled and it reluctantly slid to the floor, raising a fine dust and revealing a gigantic, ornately upholstered sofa. It had highly polished, carved wooden armrests and an identical wooden frame along all its edges. The pale yellow upholstery was stitched with an intricate pattern of gold thread. "Wow," I said. I pulled the other sheet off. The sofa was nearly as big as my bed.

"Nice, huh?" my grandmother said. "That's why I got to keep the sheets on it. Damned dogs'll get all over it and ruin it."

"This looks like it could be in a museum or something," I said. She laughed.

The dogs had followed us into the room and they seemed to take this as a cue. They trotted over to where I stood and looked up at me with their bulging eyes as though they wanted me to give them a lift onto the sofa. They licked their lips and made little grunts.

"I'll get you some other sheets to sleep on," my grandmother said. "Lie down. It's soft."

When she was gone I cautiously patted the sofa to see if I could raise some dust, then sat and let out a deep sigh. The room was too impossibly big. The sense of all that empty space was oppressive. At home I kept the door to my bathroom and the door to the hallway closed to keep my room small and manageable in the night. Large rooms could hide people and things. This

room was so large, with so many possibilities, so many places for strangers to lurk -- every lump was ideal for hiding behind -- that I knew I would have a terrible time getting to sleep. With my eyes open, every shadow would be a threat. With my eyes closed, every sound would be suspicious. And to make things even worse --

I leaped up from the sofa and looked around me. This was the exact spot where my grandfather had been laid out in his coffin. Right here, right in front of the windows. I shuddered.

"Hey!" I said.

I had glanced down to see one of the dogs -- I figured it was Sparky -- standing next to my suitcase with his leg cocked. The dog didn't pay me any attention and arced a Chihuahua-sized stream against the bag. I yelled again and kicked at him, sending him away yelping and dribbling piss on the dingy carpet. Doris growled at me and retreated with her mate.

I inspected the suitcase and found a small dark spot, no larger than a dime, that trailed a little dark line. I opened the suitcase and felt inside. The pee hadn't penetrated.

I heard the front door open and the sound of someone's heavy, scuffling footfalls down the hallway that ran alongside the living room. The footfalls went into the kitchen, where they stopped. I heard my grandmother say something. I couldn't tell the age of the man who answered.

"Don't give me that shit, Benny," my grandmother said.

"It ain't shit, it's the truth," the man said.

I heard the clinking of ice cubes.

"I want my money, bitch."

"I ain't got your money. You no good bum, you ain't got no money no how.

You want your money? You got talk to that *whore* you had in your room. You go ask *her* where your *money* is. I don't need no money from you."

"You see this?" the man asked.

My grandmother laughed.

"You ain't scaring me," she said.

"No, bitch, I ain't scaring you. I'm shooting you."

My grandmother laughed again. Ice cubes clinked. The shot sounded like a two by four slapped hard against concrete. A chair was knocked over and then I heard a groan and a sound that I had never heard before but immediately recognized, the sound of a body collapsing, of dead weight hitting the floor.

CHAPTER EIGHT

I couldn't move. I didn't realize I was holding my breath until I felt my chest begin to ache. Slowly, quietly, I exhaled and took several shallow breaths. I strained to hear something from the kitchen, but heard only the sound of traffic in the street.

My grandmother was dead, shot in her own kitchen not ten minutes after I had arrived. She was in the kitchen, on the floor bloody and dead, and I didn't know anyone else in Boston. I was next. This guy, this Benny, would come for me with his gun. I needed to hide, but I couldn't move. I couldn't make a sound. If he heard me, it would be all over.

Someone groaned. I heard footfalls in the kitchen, slow and deliberate, and a chair being moved aside. Something scraped along the floor.

"Sonofabitch!" my grandmother said, pain in her voice. "Mother of Jesus!"

I should help her, I knew; it was my duty as a grandson to help her, but this guy had a gun. I should yell for help. But who was going to help us? Spider and Charley Brown were gone. I remembered the door to my right. I could go out that way and get help. I turned toward the door then paused and listened. I heard my grandmother say,

"Shit! You worthless -- get up so I can hit you *again*! I swear I'll *knock* your head off!"

I heard the groaning again and the sound of someone rolling on the floor.

"You no good bum," my grandmother said.

I forgot about the side door and started walking slowly toward her bedroom and the kitchen beyond. From just inside the bedroom I could see a corner of the kitchen floor. A man's hand, knuckles down on the linoleum, was moving back and forth a few inches. I moved closer toward the kitchen and saw, lying on the bedroom floor a few feet from the doorway, a gun, a revolver. Was there still a wisp of smoke spiraling from the barrel?

My grandmother was talking again.

" – tired of this bullshit. Coming in here and threatening me and making me bust up my *hand*? No no. This craziness got to *stop*. Got to *stop*, dammit. I'm trying to run a *business* here and you pull this crazy *shit*? Nah nah."

I had to walk near the gun in order to see into the kitchen. I stepped around it as far as I could. Standing in the doorway, I was just a foot from the man's hand. He was lying between the table and a chair. He was brown, like me, but the thing I noticed was the blood. There was blood on his face and on the front of his shirt and on the floor around his head. I had never seen so much blood. The sight of it made me feel sick. The man groaned again and rolled over onto his side.

"Get the gun," my grandmother said.

I looked up. She was standing on the other side of the kitchen, leaning

against the sink, cradling her right hand in her left. She nodded at me.

"Go ahead. Get it. *Get the gun.*"

I walked over to the gun and picked it up. It was heavy, so much heavier than the toy guns that I had had over the years that it couldn't be real. But it was. I had heard it.

"Bring it over here," my grandmother said. "Quick."

I held the gun upside down by its grip and walked around the man on the floor.

"Unload it," she said.

"Huh?"

"Unload it. You don't know how to unload a gun?"

I shook my head. She told me to pull the small rod that released the cylinder. I pulled it and flipped the cylinder out and then tilted the pistol back toward me, dropping three rounds and the one hot empty casing into my palm.

"What you do that for?" the man said. He was sitting on the floor and holding onto the chair behind him. He was looking at his free hand, which was slick with blood. I wasn't very good at guessing adults' ages, as most kids aren't. I figured he was about twenty five years old.

"Give me them bullets," my grandmother said, watching the man.

I rolled the bullets and the casing into her left hand. She took them and put them in her pajama pocket.

"Damn, you broke my nose," the man said.

"Serves you right," my grandmother said. "Come in here and try to shoot me."

"Shit," the man said. He stood up and looked around him. "Where's my gun? Who the fuck is that?" He pointed a bloody finger at me. I tried to take a step back, but there was nowhere to go.

"You never mind about who this is," my grandmother said. "Your cousin! How you like them apples?"

I turned to her, stunned. My cousin?

"God!" the man said. He lowered himself into a chair and tilted his head back. "You broke my damn nose."

My grandmother took the gun from me with her left hand and put it in her other robe pocket. I watched the man. My cousin.

"What you looking at?" he asked. "Get me some ice."

I turned to my grandmother. She had grabbed a towel from a drawer under the sink. "Go ahead," she said.

I opened the refrigerator and pulled out a half full ice tray. My grandmother wrapped the few pieces in the towel.

"Give this to him."

"Me?"

"He ain't gonna hurt you."

I took the towel and approached the bleeding man. He snatched the towel from me and I jumped back.

"There ain't hardly no ice in here," he said, gently placing the towel on the bridge of his nose.

"Well, next time you want your nose broke, make sure there's enough ice before you go acting all crazy."

"Wasn't acting crazy," Benny said from behind the towel. "You can't take no joke."

"Joke my ass. Ain't no joke when you shoot a gun at somebody."

"Went off."

"You ain't got no business nohow joking around with no *gun* when you're drunk."

"Ain't drunk."

"High, then. That's how you *kill* somebody."

"Yeah, well you about killed me, alright."

"What do you want?" my grandmother said, facing the door. I turned to see a thin, balding white man standing just outside the kitchen in the hallway. Behind them the dark shapes of two other tenants loitered at the foot of the stairs near the door. The thin man craned his neck to see who was sitting in the chair.

"You okay, Lil?" the thin man said.

"I'm fine," she said angrily. "Cracked my damn hand up on his hard head." She held her right wrist with her left hand and slowly moved her fingers, grimacing. "Here," she said to me, nodding toward the opened drawer, "get him another towel."

I grabbed a towel and took it to Benny. His face was covered with the first towel, so I dropped this one on his lap and stepped back.

"Clean yourself up," my grandmother said. "You got blood all over the place."

The front door opened and loud voices rang down the hall.

"Fight time!" Spider said.

"... put him away in the fifth," Charley Brown said.

The tenants at the foot of the stairs said something to Spider. "What?" he said.

Meanwhile, Benny leaned forward and took the wet towel off his face. His nose had blossomed to twice its size and his eyes were puffy. The towel was stained a sickly pink with his blood. He looked down at the towel in his lap, then over at me.

"You have blood all over your shirt," I said.

"And all over the floor, too," my grandmother said.

Spider and Charley Brown appeared behind the thin balding man.

"Look like -- like the fight already been on!" Charley Brown said.

"You okay, Lil?" Spider said, looking protective. He didn't take his eyes off her as he raised a brown paper sack to his lips and took a quick drink.

"My hand's numb," she said.

"Yeah, well my nose is on fire," Benny said.

"It may be broken," the thin man said. "You ought to go to the emergency room and have it checked out."

"Emergency room? What time is it?"

"Eight thirty," I said.

"Fight's at nine," she said. "No time. Rory, get me some ice for my drink."

"There's no more ice," I told her.

She reached into her robe and pulled out a handful of crumpled bills. The spent bullet casing fell to the floor as she gingerly used her injured hand to count out two dollars.

"Run down to the corner there and get some ice. Need ice."

I took the money but I didn't move. I looked at Benny, at the shell casing on the floor, at my grandmother. The bills were warm and limp in my hand.

"Pow!" Charley Brown said. "Right -- right hand to the nose."

"Yeah, I'll put a right boot up your ass," Benny said. He had finished wiping the blood off his face and neck and was looking down at his shirt. "You ruined my shirt."

My grandmother snapped her finger at me.

"Ice," she said.

I turned and pushed my way out into the hallway. In a daze, I walked in the twilight to the corner store, the smells of the night, the aroma of food from a nearby restaurant, the vague sourness of the street, replacing the smell of gin and blood. The store was closing, but they let me in to buy the ice. I put the bag on my shoulder and went back to 39 Upton Street and stopped on the sidewalk. I swayed on my feet, exhausted. I thought I had closed the front door, but it was open now, and from the kitchen at the back end of the building I could hear the sound of a small television with the volume turned way up. People cheered the fighters in a rhythmic chant. I could imagine the fighters landing blows by how people shouted or groaned. Above the sounds of the others, I could hear my grandmother's voice. "That's my boy!" I heard her shout. "That's my boy, that's my boy!"

"Hey. Hey. Rory."

I heard the words from where I was in some soft, hidden place, but I didn't think I had to do anything in response. Something jiggled me.

"Help me make breakfast," my grandmother said, pulling me up from my shallow sleep.

I didn't know where I was. Why was the ceiling so high? I looked up at her groggily. Her hair was brushed back from her forehead and just barely held in

place by a black barret, and a cigarette with an inch-long ash perched between her fingertips. I wasn't used to waking up and seeing a woman's face. I just stared at her. "Boarders coming down for breakfast," she said and shuffled back across the cavernous living room, a trail of ashes fluttering behind her.

I heard all kinds of noise now. Traffic outside the window. A slow, measured slamming sound somewhere down the street. People talking on the stoop. My grandmother was making a racket getting cups from a cupboard. I remembered where I was and a part of me sank. I sat up and rubbed my eyes with the heels of my hands.

Blood. There had been blood all over the kitchen floor. After the fight we had gone to the hospital emergency room. When we had gotten home, I helped Spider clean it up with a bucket and a sponge. Benny's blood. The water we poured down the sink was a nauseating pink with foam on the top.

I got up and dressed, not wanting to think about the blood, the stickiness of it. I put on my sneakers and saw dark brown stains on one of them. I scuffed the marks off as best I could on the leg of the sofa..

The kitchen table was still where Spider and I had left it, pushed against the washing machine near the window. The bucket was under the far side of the table.

"Get the jag out of the refrigerator," my grandmother said, without looking

at me.

I didn't know what jag was, but I went over to the refrigerator. I opened the door and asked her what she wanted me to get.

"The jag," she said. "Jag. You know *jag*, don't you?"

"No," I said sheepishly.

She turned to me from the stove, where she had three cast iron pans out. The gas burners were glowing blue and on the stove top she had a tin of congealed bacon fat, two egg cartons and a two-pound packet of bacon. She stared at me, incredulous.

"You don't know what jag is?"

I shook my head.

"Ai, dios!" she said. She laughed and shook her head. She dipped a spatula into the bacon fat and ladled a big blotch of it into one of the pans.

"Rice! Jagacita! Portagee rice! In the big pot."

I found the large covered pot and pulled it out. Clearing a space on the counter next to the stove, I set it there for her. She put the pot on the fourth burner and turned it on. The smell of the bacon grease made me feel a little queasy. I stepped back away from the stove. My grandmother said something to me. It took a few seconds for me to realize she hadn't spoken in English.

"What did you say?"

She turned to me and repeated what she had said. When I didn't respond,

she blinked. "You don't understand, do you?" she said. I shook my head.

"Creole. Our language. Portuguese. Ai yai. You never *learned*. Course not, how could you." She looked back at the pots on the stove and shook her head.

"Fix the table," she said.

The plastic tablecloth was askew and the salt and pepper shaker and the creamer were pushed to the far side. I arranged everything neatly on the table. She looked at me quickly over her shoulder.

"No no," she said. "Fix it. The *leaves*. By the refrigerator. Fix it and pull it out in the middle of the floor. Ai, Dios, my hand."

She had been stirring the large pot of rice with the spatula in her right hand, the hand she had hit Benny with. She took the spatula in her left hand and held her right hand over her head.

"Throbs," she said to me as I pulled the table leaves from the narrow space between the refrigerator and the wall. "The doctor said to hold it over my head if it hurts. Ai yai." She kept stirring the rice with her left hand. While I enlarged the table, every pot and pan on the stove was sizzling and cracking. Eggs, bacon, rice, some red sausage. The confused smell was more pleasantly aromatic now. My mouth watered.

Next she had me set a place and a chair for seven people. I stood on a chair to get the plates and cups out of the cupboard and retrieved paper place mats from a drawer next to the cutlery. The silverware was old, bent and

dented, but it was clean. I knew how to arrange a place setting from Dolores at the restaurant. I set the table.

I didn't have any further orders so I moved closer to my grandmother, as close as I felt comfortable. She was sweating and grimacing and switching the spatula from her injured hand and holding it over her head. A drop of sweat depended from the tip of her nose. She reached up with her arm to wipe it on her sleeve, but the drop fell and sizzled in the pan of bacon.

"All done?" she said, glancing at me .

"Uh huh."

"Coffee, over on the little table. Five cups. You drink coffee?" I shook my head. "Five cups," she repeated.

On the other side of the room a coffee percolator bubbled on a card table. I unplugged the coffee maker and poured coffee at five places on the table. I plugged the machine back in.

"Unlock the door," my grandmother said, nodding toward the hallway door.

I flipped the lock off and the door pushed in. The first of the boarders bustled in to breakfast. She was a short, black woman, the blackest person I had ever seen in my life, almost as black as the nun's habit she wore. The only nuns I had ever seen were the ones at St. Anthony's. They sat in the front pew during Mass and at the carnivals and bazaars the parish held as fund-raisers they would sell tickets and run some of the games for the small children. All of

them were pale white women with thin, loose-skinned faces and papery-looking hands. Behind the thick lenses of her glasses the nun's eyes were huge and skittered back and forth as they looked me over. The nun put her hands on her hips.

"Who the hell is this?" she asked.

I couldn't have been more surprised if she slapped me in the face. I had never heard a nun speak like that before.

"That's my grandson, Rory. That's Berniece."

"Sister Margaret," the woman said emphatically. Her eyes jerked at me again. She sucked at her teeth, grunted, and pushed past me toward the table. "Hummph!"

"Bring me her plate," my grandmother said.

I did as I was told. My grandmother loaded the plate with rice, sausage and eggs, and I took the food to where the nun sat at the far end of the table. Sister Margaret was looking up at the kitchen wall, up and to the right of the window. There was a small hole I hadn't noticed. That's where the bullet went, I realized. Sister Margaret shook her head and turned to the food.

"Mm mm mm. Ought to get rid of that sonofabitch," she said, and then proceeded to eat without making the sign of the cross or saying any other kind of blessing. "Trying to shoot his own *grandmother*."

I turned back to the hole in the wall. It looked so tiny, hardly large enough

to put my pinky finger in probably. I wondered if it had gone through the wall completely, or if it was still lodged in there somewhere, a little nugget of death. The rest of the boarders started crowding into the kitchen, so I didn't have time to think about the bullet. I had to get back to work.

"I heard that shot last night," Sister Margaret said. "I said to myself, 'Ain't nothing but that boy and that foolishness again, messing around and being evil.' I ain't got no time for foolishness like *this*."

Spider and Charley Brown joined Sister Margaret on the far side of the table, where she kept glancing at them as she ate. The fourth boarder to come to breakfast was a giant Chinese man who walked with a limp. He spoke precisely to everyone at the table, but no one seemed to pay him much attention. He sat at the table and inspected me carefully.

"Why, I don't know you," he said.

"My name is Rory."

"That's my grandson," my grandmother said. "This is Mr. Milo Poong."

"Hello, grandson Rory." Mr. Poong held his large hand out and I shook it.

"An honorable grandson is a blessing to his grandparents," he said. He smiled at me and nodded for emphasis. Then he, too, looked at the hole in the wall.

"His father's a Chinaman," my grandmother said.

"Ah," Mr. Poong said. "You don't say."

"He's my adopted father," I said quickly.

"Ah!"

Everyone ate noisily for a few minutes without speaking. My grandmother made a plate for me with something of everything on it and told me to sit at the end of the table.

"Where the hell's that Harold Davenport?" she asked. No one at the table answered. "Food's getting cold," she said.

"Right here, Lil, right here. Excuse me, excuse me," said the thin man I had seen last night. He squeezed into the kitchen past Mr. Milo Poong. He sat down at the next to last chair, leaving the empty chair between himself and me.

"This is Harold," my grandmother said. "Harold Davenport. My grandson, Rory."

"Yeah, we met," Harold said.

I ate carefully, testing each of the things on my plate. The jag wasn't anything like the fried rice we made in the restaurant -- it didn't have peas or carrots or egg in it -- but it was good, and the linguica had a tangy taste to it. I hadn't realized how hungry I was. Once I satisfied myself that everything was okay, I ate ravenously.

"Had a hard time getting up," Harold said. "Busy night. I was working late anyway, and then all the commotion and excitement." He looked over at me, his mouth full of egg and sausage and said, "You sleep okay? Must be hard, coming all this way and bam! walking into a scene like that, huh? Your own

grandmother and everything. Well, she sure could use a decent grandson, I'll tell you that."

"Yeah, just keep talking," someone said.

I turned to see Benny standing in the doorway. The nose splint and the bandages stretching horizontally under his purple-black eyes divided his face into three parts. He breathed smoke out of his nose and looked like some kind of machine. I tensed, ready to move away from the table quickly if I had to.

"Go on, tell your little stories, faggot," Benny said. "What else you got to say?"

Harold Davenport didn't say anything, but turned his full attention to his breakfast. Benny puffed on his cigarette and came around the table to the empty seat. "Put that cigarette out," my grandmother said. "People are eating." Benny stood next to Davenport, looking down on his head, then crossed to the window and flicked his cigarette out. When he sat down the smell of stale cigarette smoke reminded me of Ryan.

My grandmother got up from the table and made a plate for Benny. He started eating the minute the food was in front of him. I tried not to stare, but I couldn't help trying to look for the family resemblance.

Benny lifted a fork of rice to his mouth and froze, scowling at me. "And what you looking at, Mr. California? Huh, Cumad? That what you do in California? Stare at people? California! Whoopdee doo. I guess I'm supposed

to be impressed."

Mr. Poong set his fork down on his clean plate and wiped his mouth with his paper napkin. "I have family in California," he said.

"They still working on the railroad?" Charley Brown asked, laughing.

"No, none of them are doing anything like that," Mr. Poong said, standing up.

"Ought to send you all back," Benny said.

"Ought to send someone to jail," Spider said.

"Nigger, mind your own business," Benny said.

"An excellent breakfast," Mr. Poong said. "I am fortified for the day's work."

"What kind of work you doing today, Mr. Poong?" my grandmother asked, smiling at him. She winked at me.

"I shall finish a painting, perhaps. And I have one of my students coming by. Then I have to go and see a merchant about a sign for his place of business."

"Get that money!" my grandmother said, laughing.

"We do what we must to make ends meet," Poong said.

Mr. Poong made a subtle bow to the table and disappeared.

"How about you, Harold?" my grandmother said. "What you doing today?"

Harold glanced at me, then looked down at his plate and spoke between small forkfuls of food. "Finishing up a book today, maybe tomorrow," he said.

"Gotta get it in by end of the week."

"Last week's rent five days overdue," my grandmother said.

"I'll settle up for the whole month come Friday."

"Book," Benny said and snorted. "That garbage."

"The next one is legit," Harold said. "The Demolisher series."

"Who's that, someone with big tits?" Benny said.

"Hey," my grandmother said to Benny. "You just watch it."

"You better watch it. Next time I won't fire no warning shot."

"Warning shot, my ass," my grandmother said. "You were so high you couldn't even see straight. Good thing I knocked you out so you couldn't hurt yourself."

"Ain't got no time for this foolishness," Sister Margaret said, getting up with a grunt and fixing her habit. She had dribbled some egg yolk down her front. She scraped at the crustiness with her thumb. "Shit."

I laughed at how she said the word, with two syllables.

"You need any help -- help carrying your stuff today, sister?" Charlie Brown asked.

"Nigger, I don't need no help from your sorry wino self."

I had never heard anyone except a white person use the word nigger before. I was confused. But Charlie Brown laughed, shrugged, sent his fork moving over his plate in search of more food, as unconcerned as if Sister

Margaret had called him "mister." Sister Margaret started walking toward the door.

"Stay away from that Syrian market," my grandmother said. "They're on to you."

"Don't worry about me, sister. The Lord is my shepherd."

I was finished with my breakfast. I pushed my chair back from the table and got up. My grandmother looked up at me.

"All done?"

"Yeah."

"All right," she said. She lit a new cigarette. "Start getting the dishes up."

The rest of the day I played hide and seek with my grandmother. When I was finished with a "favor" for her, I would try to slip away somewhere to think about what was going on. Within twenty minutes she would find me again and have a job for me to do. Clean up after Sparky and Doris. Take a note up to Harold Davenport on the third floor. Wash the windows in the living room. Run to the corner store and get some ginger ale.

The busy-ness helped keep me from thinking too much and getting scared, and whenever I did have time to stop and think, I forced myself to concentrate on good things. There was the house to investigate, and the neighborhood. Maybe I could go see a Red Sox game. Maybe there was

someplace nearby where I could even play baseball. I could go exploring with my movie camera. I could find some other kids. All of this could be possible if my grandmother would let up on the chores.

I kept an eye out for Benny, moving to the next room whenever I heard him approach. When he was gone I listened for his voice and the sound of his footsteps. He said he had only been joking with the gun, but I didn't believe him. He had tried to shoot my grandmother – his grandmother, too. A guy like that was liable to do anything.

Throughout the day I heard the two of them talking in the kitchen together, their voices low, sometimes breaking into laughter. The laughter, though, would just as easily and quickly turn into something angry, a curse or an insult. I couldn't make sense of how they treated each other. Just before dinner Benny threw the kitchen door open and stomped down the hall and out the front door. Doris and Sparky followed him at a safe distance, yapping at his heels.

Sister Margaret returned in time for dinner carrying two large mesh bags bulging with cans and bottles. She took the bags into the kitchen and kicked the door closed behind her. When she emerged several minutes later she was tucking something into the bonnet of her habit and singing. I watched her from the living room door that opened out onto the hallway as she mounted the steps and slowly made her way to her room to get ready for dinner.

She sang huskily:

"Yes, I know he done me dirty, done me dirty all the day.

Oh, yes he done me dirty, done me dirty all the day.

But he give me some good lovin', just can't send that man away."

The only men I had ever heard nuns sing about were God and Jesus.

Dumbfounded, I watched her climb the stairs.

Dinner was loud and oppressively hot. It had been a muggy day and although we had kept the front and foyer doors propped open with chairs and raised all the windows, the only breeze we felt was faint and freighted with the odors of the city. By the time the dinner of *canj*, a thick chicken soup with rice, was ready in the large pot, and the boarders were seated at the table, my grandmother and I were drenched in sweat. I wrapped ice cubes in a towel and kept rubbing my face and neck. My grandmother kept a glass of iced gin handy and took turns rolling it across her forehead and drinking from it as she sat in her chair at the end of the table. Since she wouldn't eat until after everyone had gotten up from their plates, she played referee and emcee, keeping people in line with jokes and warnings. Her favorite threat was of eviction, and she used it on several people over the course of dinner.

Benny started out in a surly mood, pointing his finger at Harold Davenport or shaking a fist at the entire table, but by the time he had his dinner half eaten he had lost his interest in baiting the others. He lowered his head over his plate

and ate methodically. I watched him carefully but made sure we didn't make eye contact.

After dinner I cleaned up the dishes with Mr. Poong, who talked to me about watercolors. Then I swept the floor, scratching the cracked linoleum with the old broom. My grandmother closed her bedroom door and didn't say anything to me, so I slipped out of the kitchen and went down into the basement, a spot I hadn't explored yet.

The dim light at the top of the stairs only reached the landing below. I crept down into the murk and the heavy smell of mildew and wet cement. At the bottom of the stairs I stopped to let my eyes get accustomed to the darkness. Footfalls sounded above me like hammer blows, and down here I thought I heard something scratching along the floor. I held onto the bannister and waited, feeling a tingle at the base of my neck.

The basement became bigger as my eyes adjusted. The far wall moved back ten feet, twenty feet, thirty. I felt around and finally touched a light switch in the wall. I flipped it and two bulbs popped on in the ceiling. Against the far wall hunched the dark shapes of the furnace and the hot water heater. To the right, at the other end of the house, was the door leading to the small enclosed backyard. Boxes and crates and burlap sacks and trunks were piled everywhere, in no apparent order, with paths cutting through the piles of debris. I carefully made forays among the stacks, my nose itching from the smell of dry-

rotted canvas and leather and the heavy odor of heating oil. Among the broken pieces of furniture I saw an old bathtub that had been sawed in half. Next to the tub were fragments of toilets, copper pipe, steel plumbing fixtures, several heavy steel tool chests, open and empty.

I found a heavy wooden footlocker painted green. Letters were stencilled on the ends and top in black paint. My father had one of these lockers in the garage before the fire. The locker sat against a wall, and on top of it were some cardboard boxes and a duffel bag with SANTOS stencilled on it. The smell of oil was especially strong here, and there was something else, too. I felt the duffel bag and found the shape of a can that sloshed when I pushed against it. Gasoline. It had been almost three weeks since the fire in our house. I took a deep breath and stepped back away from the duffel bag. Even though I had been ashamed of myself whenever I thought of burning something in the days after the fire, the shame had slowly faded and now the desire to burn something was coming back. I felt myself breathing harder. There were plenty of things here to burn, but I wouldn't know where to go to burn them. If Ryan were here, what would he think? He would figure out what we could do. Just then I heard the door open at the top of the stairs.

"Rory? Hey, you down there?"

I hesitated, then answered. "Yeah?"

"Come on up. Phone call. Your father."

My heartbeat quickened. My father. He was calling to tell me that he had made a mistake and was making arrangements for me to come back home. Everything was going to be okay. My heartbeat quickened and I ran up the stairs two at a time, thinking about how I would apologize for the stupid things I had said that night in the apartment kitchen. I would take it all back and he would take me back. Tomorrow -- tonight? -- I would be flying home to California, away from this strange, angry house.

My grandmother was standing next to her bed holding the phone down by her side. She handed it to me and went back into the kitchen.

"Hello?" Silence. "Hello?"

There was a noise at the other end, the clattering sound of something metal hitting the floor. My father swore and there was a muffled banging sound and then he came on the line. "You there, kid?"

"Yeah, I'm here."

"I'm at the restaurant," he said. "Just knocked over some stuff. Hold on." There was silence again for a few seconds. "Okay, I'm back. How you doing?"

"Okay," I said. I didn't know why I said that; habit, I guess.

"Your flight okay?"

"I guess. The food was pretty stinky."

"I called last night to see if you got in but your grandmother said she was still waiting for you. Everything okay?"

"Yeah." I heard the sound of my grandmother's house slippers on the floor and turned to see her standing next to me, smiling.

"Yeah?" my father said. "You eating okay?"

"Yeah, I'm eating fine," I said.

My grandmother laughed gently. "Eating Portagee food!" she said and seemed to be pretty proud of herself.

"You like that kind of food alright?" my father said.

"Yeah." I wanted her to go away so I could tell him about Benny and the gun and all the strange people here. Let me come home, I wanted to say. I won't get into any more trouble. I won't burn anything ever again. Please, just let me come home. I'm sorry about what I said to you that night. I didn't mean it. I just want to come home.

"Well, okay, then. I just wanted to make sure you were doing okay. I, ah, well, I guess that's it. You -- you give me a call sometime, okay?"

"Do you --"

"Huh?"

My grandmother moved to the other side of the room. "All that Chinese food all this time made you too skinny," she said, her back to me. "Need to fatten you up."

"Do you know when it -- when I can come home?" I said quickly, softly, covering my mouth with my hand, my lips touching the mouthpiece.

"Yeah, me, too," my father said. "Okay, talk to you later."

The line clicked and I heard a dial tone. I closed my eyes tight until they hurt and bright diamonds appeared behind my eyelids and mashed the earpiece against my forehead. No no no. I felt a scream rising within me. I wanted to yell and smash the phone down.

I heard my grandmother's slippers shuffling back across the floor and opened my eyes. For a brief second I couldn't see anything, then dark geometric shapes unfolded in front of me. My grandmother returned to the kitchen, laughing. "All them Chinese too skinny," she said. "Fatten you up." The phone settled noisily into the cradle when I set it down.

My grandmother and I shared the bathroom on the second floor with Benny and two other boarders, a Puerto Rican and a Syrian who shared a room. These two men went off early in the morning and didn't return until late, if at all. They didn't take meals at the house. It didn't make sense to me that my grandmother should own the house and not have a bathroom to herself. I had my own bathroom back home. But it didn't seem to bother her. I heard her going up and down the stairs and she never complained.

The bathroom was a small murky room barely large enough to hold its three ancient fixtures. I had never seen a clawfoot tub before, or a toilet with a pull chain or a sink with separate spigots for hot and cold water. Everything

looked dirty in the amber light from the old bulb above the mirror, but when I investigated I saw that the sink and the tub and the walls were discolored with age. The small window high over the tub was coated with a milky film. I couldn't tell what the film was or see what the view out the window was because I was too short to reach.

The first morning I had awakened in the dark, having to pee, but I was afraid to leave the living room when the rest of the house was dark and quiet, so I waited, hoping for the boarders to start stirring and making noise. When I couldn't hold it any longer I stuffed my feet into my sneakers and quietly climbed the stairs. Through the skylight at the very top of the building the faint blue glow of morning seeped into the stairwell, lighting my way just enough so that I didn't stumble.

Each succeeding morning I felt more confident about my dim journey to the bathroom. I realized by the second day that my grandmother didn't get up until about fifteen minutes before breakfast, so this time in the morning was my best chance to explore the house. Beginning on the third morning I climbed the stairs to the other floors.

The third floor was where Sister Margaret and Harold Davenport lived, she to the left of the stairs, he to the right. Straight ahead was the bathroom for that floor. There were two other doors, but no one lived behind them. Harold told me later that one of the rooms was for storage, and the other one was

vacant. The man who had lived there, an old Cape Verdean, had gotten sick and left several years ago to live with family somewhere on the Cape. He had lived in the house the longest of any of the tenants. He had been a good friend of my grandfather's, or so Harold had been told, and Harold guessed that my grandmother didn't want to rent the room out right away for some kind of sentimental reasons.

Spider and Charlie Brown lived in the two rooms to the left of the staircase on the fourth floor. I was surprised to find out that they had separate rooms because they did everything together. I never saw one of them alone. On the other side of the staircase was a woman who was in beautician school.

The light at the top of the stairs, the last landing, was out. I didn't venture up there. There was only one room there, an attic, Harold said. No one went there except for my grandmother.

"What's up there?" I asked.

I was standing outside Harold's room at the time, leaning over the railing and looking up into the darkness. Harold, who was always awake when I made my trip up the stairs, was standing in his doorway holding a cup of coffee. Through his doorway I could see bookcases full of books, old movie posters, a desk with a typewriter on it.

"Lot of stuff some of the oldtimers left behind," Harold said. "The Cape Verdeans who used to live here, either they died and left stuff, or didn't pay their

rent and she kept stuff."

"That's what I am," I said. "Cape Verdean."

"I know. I figured, I mean, since that's what your grandmother is."

"You want a cup of coffee?" Harold asked.

"I don't drink coffee."

"Yeah, you're just a kid. You don't need it yet. The world of coffee." Harold slurped his coffee noisily as though to make a point.

Did Harold really write books? He didn't look like an author. In school our literature books had a section in the back with small pictures of the authors. The looked either old and disintinguished or young and very smart, intense people with penetrating eyes and no smiles. Harold just looked like an average person. That wasn't so odd in this house, though, I realized. People didn't look like what you would expect. Who would imagine by looking at him that Mr. Poong painted? How would you know that Sister Margaret really wasn't a nun?

"You write books?" I asked. I looked into his room again at all the books on his small bookshelves. There were stacks of books on top of the bookshelves and on the floor.

"What? Oh, oh, yeah. Well, you know."

"I read alot. I've got a ton of books."

"Yeah, well these ain't comic books or nothing. Nothing for kids, you know."

I frowned at him. "I read real books," I said. "What kind do you write? Are you really a writer?"

"Yeah, of course," he said, looking over his shoulder into his room. "I do some science fiction every once in a while, some westerns, leisure books."

"Leisure books? What's that?"

"Well, for, you know, ah, grown ups who want to, ah, just pass some time."

I wanted to see those books, hold them in my hands, have the proof right in front of me. "I didn't bring any books with me," I said. "I didn't have enough space in my suitcase. Can I read one of your books?"

"Uh, sure, kid. Yeah, hold on, let me find one. Hold on."

He walked over to the bookcase and ran his fingers along the spines of the books, reading the titles to himself in a low voice. He picked one out and brought it back to me, a thin paperback with a brightly colored cover of a cowboy on a horse firing two six shooters at unseen enemies. The words Colt Justice were printed red above the cowboy's head and in smaller print, beneath the horse's hooves, the name Reston Dodd appeared.

"Hey," I said, "this isn't your name."

"That's my pseudonym," he said.

"Like Mark Twain? Why don't you have your real name on it?"

"What sounds more like a western author's name, kid, Harold Davenport or Reston Dodd?"

"This one, I guess."

"You can keep that one," he said. "I got plenty more."

"Cool. Hey, can you autograph it for me?"

He laughed. "Eh, what the hell?" He got a pen from his desk and wrote something on the title page for me. I read what he had scribbled. I couldn't make any sense of his handwriting except to see that he had written my name Rorie.

"You gone down to the park or anything? Played some ball?"

"My grandmother has all these chores for me to do."

Harold laughed. "Your grandmother would put Jesus Himself to work if He showed up on the doorstep. 'Hello, Lord! Here's a broom!'"

I laughed at the image and immediately felt guilty.

"She ain't a bad woman, but she ain't an easy one, either. Running a house like this ain't no easy job for a woman, that's why she keeps *him* around. When your grandfather was around he wasn't much help, especially the last few years when he was sick. A place like this, a rooming house, attracts characters, so when your cousin come back from the war, she gave him a place to stay to help her keep things in line. He still thinks he's fighting a war or something, though, high all the time on that reefer. But you got to stand up to her, you know? Otherwise, you'll just keep working and working and pretty soon you won't be a kid anymore, you'll be a used-up old man like me. That's

the secret, kid. Don't let them use you, regardless who they are: your boss, your teachers, your grandmother. I'm not saying be a loafer or nothing. I mean, you got to do the things you got to do. And people, see, people'll just keep pushing, a little more, a little more. What can they get away with? Some more? Okay, a little more. You get me? You see?"

Harold drank some more coffee and stepped into the hallway. He pushed his shoulders back and lifted his chin.

"Hey,' you say finally. 'Hey, enough. I'm going to do my stuff.' See? Not angry, not wiseass. Just, you know, setting the limits. You got to decide when it's enough."

"Rory!"

It was my grandmother calling up the stairwell. Harold flinched and his shoulders drooped. He stepped back into his apartment. "Good luck, kid."

"Yeah."

I followed my grandmother back into the kitchen. "Sit down," she said, talking over her shoulder as she started cooking breakfast. "Sit down." In front of my usual seat was a small notepad no larger than a deck of cards and a little red pencil on the table. "Need you to go to the store for me after breakfast," she said.

Should I say something now, like Harold said?

"Take this down," she said.

"Are -- are there any kids around here?" I asked.

"Rice. What?"

"Kids. Are there any kids I can play with?"

"Kids?" she said, looking at me. "Kids all over the place. Chinese kids at the end of the block. Puerto Ricans over on Tremont. Niggers over on Washington Street. You gotta watch out. Lot of them are no good. Bad. Turn out just like Benny."

I looked at the piece of paper. Just like Spider and Charley Brown and Sister Margaret, she said nigger so casually, it was as though she didn't really mean it. She was dark herself. Someone on the street might call her a nigger. That thought made me angry at imagined taunters. Why were we so dark?

"You get down rice?" she asked.

I wrote the word down. The pencil was actually an eyeliner, so it wrote in a thick, crude line.

"Rice," I said.

"Eggs, bacon, linguica."

"Huh?"

"Linguica. Portagee sausage. What we have for breakfast."

I spelled it as best I could.

"Rat poison. Ginger ale. TV Guide. Dr. Scholl's corn pads. Epsom salts. Green beans. Preparation H. Baloney. Bread. You got that?"

I read the list back to her.

"Peppermint candies," she added. "Dog food."

I repeated the last two items to her.

"Okay," she said, "start getting ready for breakfast," she said.

Two crumpled twenty dollar bills in my pocket, sunshine filtering through the leafy heads of trees, warm dry air on my skin – they all made me feel energized. I kicked a rusty can in front of the house down the sidewalk, glad to be putting my muscles and my strength to something other than washing and toting and arranging. My grandmother was so different from what I had expected. Through the years I had occasionally wondered about her, prompted by a birthday or Christmas card with its five dollar bill tucked inside. The image I had created of her was based on the grandmothers I saw on tv. Since my father's mother had died years before, that grandmother couldn't be a source of comparison. The grandmother of my imagination was chubby, gray-haired, good-natured, indulgent. She gave hugs and cookies, not gruff commands. She didn't curse or drink and her house was clean and smelled of baking, the kind of place you could imagine going to for Thanksgiving or Christmas. Her dinner table would be long, gracefully set with a linen tablecloth and napkins, steaming trays and bowls of holiday foods, and sitting around it would be a happy, smiling family. No one carried a gun; there weren't

any winos in the family.

My father hadn't prepared me. How could he have prepared me for this, though? Maybe telling me in advance would have just made things worse. Or maybe she had changed over the years?

I wondered what he was doing now. It was ten o'clock in Boston, so that meant seven in Ferris. He would be up, smoking his cigarettes in the apartment kitchen. Was he thinking about me, or was he too busy with the house and the restaurant? That started me thinking about Tony and the money from the bank. Fifty thousand dollars. On a good day at the China Star we would make only about a hundred and twenty dollars. How long would it take to make up fifty thousand? I tried doing the math in my head and lost my concentration on the can and kicked it out into the street, under a parked car. I got down on my hands and knees. The can was under the center of the car, impossible to retrieve. I stood up and brushed my hands and the knees of my jeans off just as a car whizzed by in the street a few feet from me. I looked around, confused. In the distance, faint but occasionally growing louder, I heard the sound I had heard all week, a sound I couldn't identify, a low, rumbling whumping sound. It filled my ears like my own heartbeat.

The supermarket was right across the street from the Boston Cathedral, an immense gray building with the largest crucifix I had ever seen on top of its

steeple. A massive Jesus hung there, his face indiscernible from this distance. But I could guess what he looked like. I imagined my grandmother making him do chores around her house, and then I felt guilty. I glanced over my shoulder at the crucifix one last time and pushed my way through the glass door into the market.

Inside a confusion of smells and sounds stopped me on the rubber shoemat – spices, bodies, meat, cigarette smoke, and below all these smells the odor of food gone bad. The ching of cash registers and loud music, mixed with the rumbling overhead from a fan or air conditioner, punctuated the sounds of people talking and yelling in Spanish, Chinese. It looked like the supermarket back in Ferris, except the people here were all brown or black or yellow and everything looked vaguely dirty – the people, the floors, the things on the shelves. A fat man with a big mustache walked past me wearing an apron stained brown with blood. He was yelling something in Spanish to someone on the other side of the store. He turned up one of the aisles and sauntered in a wide, arm-swinging walk and shouted again.

I felt conspicuous, staring as I was, but the only person who paid me any attention was an old Puerto Rican woman who nudged me from behind and pushed past me into the market. She muttered something in Spanish and smiled a toothless smile.

I grabbed a shopping cart and headed down the first aisle, bumping the

cart along over the cracked and swollen linoleum, searching the shelves for the items on the list. Rat poison. Preparation H. Green beans. Ginger ale. I was tempted to throw a six pack of Coke into the cart, because ginger ale made me sneeze, but I didn't want to risk making my grandmother mad and I didn't want to spend my own money.

On the far side of the market, where the meat section began, I could see a display of pickle bottles stacked in a pyramid at the end of the aisle. I rounded the corner and pulled the cart up to the meat coolers, searching through the sausage section until I found the packages marked "linguica" and picking out the heaviest package I could find.

I had passed the bacon, so I turned the cart around to look for it and accidentally ran one of the wheels into a deep rut in the floor. When I couldn't push the cart out of the rut with a nudge, I rocked back and pushed it hard. At that instant, another kid scooted around the corner pushing his own cart, and as I freed my cart it collided with his, knocking it into the pyramid of pickle jars. The two of us watched, paralyzed, as the pyramid swayed away from us and then back toward us. I thought the bottles would tilt back the other way and stop, but they seemed to just hang over us, frozen, before toppling over onto the floor. The sound of popping, shattering glass silenced every other noise in the store.

The other kid turned to me. He was Puerto Rican, I guessed, maybe a

shade or two lighter than I was. He was chubby, not really fat, but close enough that I knew kids at school probably called him Fatty or Fatso. His black hair curled on his head in tight coils. He stared, wide-eyed and open-mouthed. I stared back. For three or four seconds there was absolute silence.

Then the yelling began. The fat man in the butcher's apron appeared beside me, yelling in Spanish. The other kid talked quickly back to the man and pointed at me emphatically. The man turned to me and started waving his big, bloody finger at me .

"What? What?" I kept saying. "I don't speak Spanish."

The other kid switched to English right away. "It was him! It was him! He hit my cart. He ran into me! He did it!"

"What you do?" the butcher said. "Look at the pickles!"

"It wasn't my fault," I said.

I tried explaining about the hole my cart had gotten stuck in, but with the kid yammering away and the butcher leaning close over me smelling of blood and the other people now gathering around, the words stuck in my throat. I got out one sentence.

"My cart stuck."

One of the bystanders said something in Spanish and several people started laughing. An elderly black man standing a few feet away said, "You sure in a pickle now, boy!"

The butcher must have thought I was going to run away, because he grabbed me by my collar. I felt the man's hand sticky against my face and smelled sickly sweet blood.

"You going to have to pay for all this," the butcher said.

"Like fuck he is."

The butcher and the jabbering kid and I turned to see Benny. He stood a few feet away scowling, his dark eyes menacing above the bandages. "Let him go," he said. "He didn't do nothing. I saw the whole thing. It wasn't his fault."

"Eh, you troublemaker. You keep out of this."

Benny pulled his cigarette out of his mouth slowly and then flicked it hard against the floor. The cherry popped off and skittered a few feet away.

"This is my cousin, okay? So take your motherfucking hand off him."

I shied away from both of them. Did Benny have his gun? Was he high, like Harold said he was all the time? Benny and the butcher stood almost toe to toe. The crowd parted and a short Puerto Rican man walked up to us.

"Eh, an accident, huh? What's going on, Rudolfo?"

The butcher turned to the other man and spoke in Spanish, still holding onto my collar.

"Hey, man, speak in English," Benny said.

The butcher ignored him and continued his story. He waved toward me with a shake of his fat hand, pointed to the other boy and the pickles. The short

man, who must have been his boss, nodded and while the butcher continued to talk, gently took hold of the butcher's hand and made him release me.

"You are with the boy?" the short man asked Benny.

"He's my cousin."

"Someone will have to pay for the pickles," the man said.

"Hey, fuck the pickles, all right? Motherfucking fuck the pickles. I tell you what, see this hole in the floor here? This hole here? That's what did it. You see? You're worried about your damn pickles and you got this hole in the floor."

Both the butcher and the short man stepped back a foot or so from Benny, who was making fists and shifting his weight from foot to foot. The muscles in his neck flexed. I found myself standing beside the other kid, both of us watching Benny's performance.

"We ought to sue you," Benny said. "You understand that in English? Sue? Because you got a fucking hole in your floor? He probably hurt himself. Didn't you, kid?" He didn't look at me to confirm this. He shifted his eyes between the two Puerto Rican men. "You jack up the prices because you know people can't afford to go anywhere else and you make jackass stupid pyramid pickles and you don't even try to fix the floor with the fucking holes in it."

"Yeah," an older black man from the crowd said. "Everything more expensive here than downtown. You-all is making some big money and you got rats running around bigger than my grandkids." Everyone looked at the old

man and he nodded emphatically. "That's right."

"So he ain't paying nothing," Benny said. He stared at the other two men.

The smaller Puerto Rican started smiling after a few seconds and held his hands up. "An accident," he said. "Accidents happen, right?"

"Holes don't," Benny answered. He took his time looking around at the crowd. "You better just hope we don't sue. That could cost you a lot of money."

The butcher grumbled something and headed back behind the meat counter. The second man turned to the gathered crowd and started shooing them away. He called out for one of the stock boys to start cleaning up the pickles.

Benny fished a bent cigarette out of his pocket and slowly straightened it. "What you looking at?" Benny asked me.

"Nothing," I said. "Thanks."

"Yeah," Benny dismissed me. He took a drag off the cigarette, saw that it was broken and flicked it toward the pickle juice. "Shit. Get me some cigarettes and meet me outside."

"What – what kind?" I asked.

Benny gave me an impatient look, then spoke as he started to walk away. "Kools."

Outside I stood in front of the market in the bright sunshine for five

minutes, moving back and forth on the sidewalk to keep out of people's way, but Benny didn't show up. I hefted the two grocery bags by their twine handles and started down the street. I would give him his cigarettes when I saw him.

I replayed the scene in my mind and kept seeing Benny face the other two men down. My father never got into arguments of any kind with people in public, even people in the China Star who were acting like jerks. You never know who people might be, he said, or what they might be able to do. Maybe that person had a really hard day, or even a hard life, and all you're doing is just adding to their misery. You never could tell. Why make someone feel bad over a little thing?

The thing was, I doubted that I would have gotten out of the market as easily as I had if Benny hadn't made such a scene. They probably would have made me clean up the floor, or pay for the pickles. I was still amazed at how he had pulled it off. My father would have let me take the blame to avoid getting into an argument.

I reached the corner and smelled a pungent, cloying odor. There in the gutter, lying in a dried out crust of mud, was the decomposing body of a cat. Against my will, I investigated. How had it died? It could have been run over by a car, killed by a dog, poisoned, maybe even shot. I wanted a stick so I could poke at it, turn it over and see what kinds of insects would scurry out from under it, but there was nothing around to use. I bent closer. The cat's face was

frozen in a permanent snarl, the skin of its lips shrivelled and pulled back to the gums. Bones in its legs poked through the dried, torn skin. Ants moved methodically over its head. Sometimes back home, walking along the canal, I would come upon the dried-out bodies of birds I or some other kid had killed days or weeks before. They were so small, so flattened and featureless, that they didn't seem real, but like pieces of trash. This cat looked like a cat.

"I hate cats." Benny was standing behind me, sneering. He spat at the cat. "Looks like this one ran out of lives."

"What do you think happened?" I said. "You think a dog got him?"

"Car," Benny said judiciously. "Dog would of ate him up. Where's my cigarettes?"

I backed away from the carcass, put the bags down and fished out two packs of cigarettes and handed them over.

"Matches?"

"Didn't get any."

Benny snorted. "Lucky for you I got some left over." He lit a cigarette and shook the pack toward me. A cigarette popped halfway out. "Here."

I hesitated. I had tried to smoke a couple of times with Ryan and didn't like it. I wanted to say no thanks, but I took the cigarette.

"Here."

Benny gave me the matches. I put the cigarette in the corner of my mouth

and struck the match. I inhaled shallowly and coughed, gagging immediately.

"Shit," Benny said. "A cherry."

"I smoke sometimes," I said quickly. "This tastes funny."

"Menthol," Benny said. "Kools. You're probably a Marlboro Man, being from out west, right?" He stood smoking in silence for a few seconds. I gave my cigarette another small puff and managed to keep the smoke down for a fraction of a second, but still I wondered what the big thing about smoking was. Menthol, especially, tasted nasty. "This thing stinks," Benny said, motioning to the cat. "Come on." He started up the street and I fell in behind him, hoping he would offer to take one of the grocery bags. "How much you got left?" Benny asked.

"Thirteen dollars."

We stopped at the corner and waited for the traffic to clear. We both spotted a young Puerto Rican woman on the other side of the street heading in the direction of the market. She had on a sleeveless shirt and tight jeans. Her long hair hung straight behind her, and as she walked her breasts popped inside her blouse. Benny called out to her familiarly, but when she looked over at him she quickly looked away again. When it was apparent she wasn't going to respond again, he said "bitch!" He turned back to me. I was still watching the woman. "You ain't getting none of that, short stuff."

I felt myself blush. Girls at school didn't jiggle like that when they walked.

"Staring like that, like you got something to give a woman like her. Give me the money."

"It's my grandmother's money."

"Yeah, well she's my grandmother, too, and she don't give you shit unless you take it."

"She's going to want the change."

"How much you think they were going to charge you for those damned pickles back there? Huh? Everything you got in your pocket, that's how much. Now I just saved all that money by sticking up for your sorry ass. So you can just tell Nana about the pickles and how you had to pay for them, and she won't worry about the change."

"I don't want to lie," I said.

The bags were getting heavy. I set them down and rubbed my hands where the twine handles had dug red creases. Benny had taken a step back away from me and was watching me closely.

"Give me the money, short stuff. You're going to be going back to California soon, so why do you care about her measly thirteen dollars?"

The simple and true answer was that I didn't want to do anything dishonest; that it was a sin to lie and to steal, especially from your own grandmother. But that probably wouldn't mean anything to him, so I did what I saw plenty of kids do in school when they were in trouble and were asked a

direct question. I shrugged and said, "I don't know."

"You don't owe her nothing, man! She makes you work like you were one of her little dogs everyday. She owes you."

I had a sudden inspiration. "I'll give you half," I said.

"What?"

"And I get to keep the other half." Benny started to speak but I added, "You said she owed me."

Benny made a face and threw his cigarette away. "Man --" he said, but I knew that I had him.

I produced six and a half dollars before he had a chance to change his mind. He snatched the money from my palm, pocketed it, then reached out and slapped me across the face. The blow shocked me more than it hurt, but tears came to my eyes anyway.

"Think you're such a fucking smart guy, don't you?" he said. "I ain't got time to bother with you, so I'm taking this, all right? But the next time I say something, I mean it. You got me? You don't live here."

My lower lip trembled and I blinked a tear out of one eye. I clenched my fists. Benny laughed.

"Now go on home, dog boy, so she can put you to work again."

Hee turned and headed off down the street to the right, sauntering as though he had just put a thousand dollars in his pocket.

I wanted to chase him down and climb on his shoulders and pummel his head, punch his ears and his eyes in, break his nose even more. I saw the blood on the floor from the other night and I wanted to make him bleed again. Instead, I stood and shook and fought off the crying fit.

Squee-squee, squee-squee, squee-squee. I turned in the direction of the sound and saw through blurred eyes the figure of a boy pushing something. I snuffled and wiped away the tears, ashamed. It was the Puerto Rican kid from the supermarket coming, pushing a rickety two-wheeled cart in front of him, the kind old people used to carry their groceries. The kid slowed as he got closer and looked concerned.

"Hey," he said. And when I didn't answer, but only stared back sullenly, he said, "hey. Did he -- did that guy beat you up or something?"

"What do you care?" I asked. "What are you, my friend now or something?"

The kid opened his mouth to speak, turned and looked back in the direction of the supermarket, swung back to me. "I was scared. I didn't want to get in trouble."

"How about me? I got in trouble."

"I been in trouble there before," the kid said. "I knocked some things off a shelf another time and they got really mad at me."

My eyes had gotten blurry again. I swore and wiped them. The kid fidgeted, pushed his cart back and forth.

"You want to use my cart?" he asked. "Those bags hurt your hands. I found this cart in an alley. It was kind of busted up, but I got my uncle to help me fix it up." He looked proudly at the cart. "It's noisy. For a quarter I'll let you use it."

"Okay."

"In advance."

"Nope."

The kid was silent for two seconds. "Okay."

I handed over my bags. The kid balanced them on top of his and secured them to the cart with some stretch cords.

"There. My name is Eduardo," he said. He held his hand out. What kind of kid shook hands? But I didn't want to be rude. I held out my hand and shook his.

"Rory."

"I'm going to be a geographer," Eduardo said. "What about you?"

"I -- I don't know," I said. Normally I said I wanted to make movies, unless my father was around and then I said I wanted to be a doctor, because I knew that made him feel good. But today, now, neither of those things occurred to me. The future meant nothing. I could see no farther than the next half hour. I would return to 39 Upton Street and help my grandmother start getting ready

for dinner, then after dinner was done and I had helped clean up, I would go to sleep and it would start all over again tomorrow.

"You don't know?" Eduardo said. "Huh." He looked at his watch. "Hey, I gotta go. Come on."

We started walking, each of us holding a handle, and the cart squeaked along behind us.

CHAPTER NINE

Some people are good liars because they can convince themselves that their lies are the truth and can will themselves into believing their own stories. Others have the nerve to stand up to questioning with icy calm and dare their interrogators to prove them wrong. And there are some who relish the excitement of creating more lies to cover the first one and get a thrill out of seeing how far they can go, hovering on the edge of disaster. I could do none of these things, so my grandmother knew right away what had happened to the money when I got back and gave her the receipt and the change I had left over and told her about Benny helping me out at the supermarket. "Benny took it," she said, putting the money and the receipt in her housecoat and laughing. "I know him. Six and a half dollars. Gonna buy some of that reefer, act all crazy."

I was afraid of what would happen when Benny found out that I had failed to cover for him. When he got home that night after dinner and went into the kitchen to get something out of the refrigerator, she was waiting for him. They went at it for about fifteen minutes, sneering at each other, cursing, pointing their fingers in each other's faces. I thought, oh, God, he's going to pull his gun again, but when it was all over she fixed him something to eat. The only indication he gave that he was angry at me was to snatch the pepper shaker from me when I handed it to him.

After breakfast the next morning I went out front and sat on the stoop. I didn't like being inside the house any more than I had to. It was too dark in there for me, too cluttered, and it didn't smell fresh; lingering under the smell of cooking and pine-scented cleaning supplies was the odor of people's bodies and years of cigarette smoke that had been absorbed into the wallpaper.

I didn't recognize Eduardo until he stopped at the bottom of the stairs.

"Hey," he said.

"Hey."

He must have been headed to the market because he had his cart.

"I'm going to the market," he said. "You need to go too?"

"No."

"I forgot some stuff yesterday," he said, looking penitent. "The pickles made me forget. What are you doing?"

"Nothing," I said. "There's nothing to do."

He folded the cart up and came up the stairs. "I wonder if they got more pickles," he said. He looked like he wanted me to invite him to sit, so I did. He plopped down one step below me. "I bet they don't fix the floor. They don't care if somebody gets hurt. They're Puerto Rican in there like we are, too, but my grandmother says they cheat everybody. Are you going to live here?"

"I'm just visting. I got in trouble back home and my father sent me here."

"Trouble?" His face brightened. "What happened?"

I told him everything about the fire. It was the first time I had told the story completely, without trying to protect Ryan. It felt good to tell just the truth.

"Wow," Eduardo said. "Were you afraid?"

"I didn't really have time to be scared. Everything just happened."

"That's called arson," he said.

"I think it's arson when you do it on purpose. This was an accident."

He thought for a second. "There are fires around here all the time," he said. "On the news they say it's arson, so I guess somebody's doing it on purpose."

I thought about what it felt like to burn something in Ryan's garage, how with a splash of gas and a match we could change things, destroy something. But wanting to do it to an entire building was beyond what I could understand.

"Why would they do that?" I asked Eduardo.

"I don't know. Last week they burned a building two blocks from ours. It was this old broken-down building on the corner next to this empty lot. I hope they don't burn our building." He looked at his watch. "I gotta go. My mother said be back in an hour or else. Can I come over tomorrow?"

"Sure." I didn't know what we would do, but it would be better than sitting on the stoop or trying to avoid my grandmother and the chores she had for me.

"Okay," he said, going down to his cart. "I can tell you about geography and you can tell me some more about burning stuff."

I cringed at how loud he spoke and looked over my shoulder, but there was no one there to hear. Eduardo unfolded his cart and waved and headed down the street. He hadn't been gone a minute when my grandmother yelled my name from the kitchen. Time to do get back to work.

At first my grandmother didn't like Eduardo coming around because he was a Puerto Rican. "Them Puerto Ricans steal worse than niggers," she said. "Carry them *knives* all the time. Gotta *watch out* for them." But after a few days she didn't seem to mind him too much, although she did glance his way every few minutes to see if he was trying to swipe something. It seemed that she didn't really like anybody or anything. I felt she didn't like me all that much to begin with, but as the days wore on she became nicer and would talk to me about things not specifically related to cooking and cleaning and running errands. She liked baseball, and when the Red Sox were on television we would watch the game on her small black-and-white television, while she sipped her gin and I nursed a root beer. The Red Sox weren't very good, but they were the only team Boston had. "Got to root for the hometown boys," she said. "Used to be the Braves and the Red Sox, but now we just got the Sox."

Sometimes one of the boarders would come down and watch the games with us, but my grandmother made it clear by not being very hospitable that she preferred not to have to deal with them in the evening unless she expressly

invited them. So it was usually just the two of us. Benny showed up once or twice, but he would either be too antsy to sit still, wanting to talk about the various boarders and what should be done with them, or he would keep nodding off in his chair and snoring. My grandmother would wake him up and send him off.

I couldn't understand why she allowed Benny to stay around. I knew that my father wouldn't give him a place to stay if Benny were his grandson and did the kind of things I saw him do. She didn't need to call the police and have him arrested, but she could kick him out. I wanted to ask her, but I had learned by then from the way she treated her boarders that her business was none of theirs, and would certainly be none of mine. It seemed to me that putting a question like that to her would require more than ordinary courage. It was partly the question, but it was mostly her. She scared me.

I wondered if my mother was like her, or if maybe she was like my grandfather, whom I could barely remember beyond the waxy face in the casket years ago. What I wanted to know especially was why she had left me and my father, why she had never called or written, what she was doing now. My grandmother was the key. She would know what had happened.

Over the last few years I hadn't spent much time wondering about where she was, except in the vague way I might also wonder about a friend who had moved away. Once I went through a period when I felt my father wasn't being

fair to me for not letting me hang around with some kids in my old neighborhood, and at this time I had imagined that things would be different if my mother were there. She would let me do the things my father wouldn't. But then my interest in the neighborhood kids passed, and I returned to living exactly how and where I was, not worrying about the past or what was going on somewhere else. My mother's disappearance was an event that had happened long ago and didn't necessarily have much to do with me.

For the first few weeks in Boston, I hadn't have much time to be homesick. It wasn't until my grandmother started giving me free time in chores that I felt the first true pangs of missing Ferris. But before I had the chance to pine over the lost summer, the new world around me started calling. The house remained mysterious -- the dark, rank basement and its heaps and mounds an ominous enticement, the roof equally obscure, another world beyond the skylight at the top of the ladder.

Then there was the neighborhood, which I slowly explored with Eduardo, the geographer. Eduardo told me he wasn't coordinated and didn't care too much about sports anyway, so I couldn't interest him in going to the park and trying to get into the sandlot baseball games. Instead we moved in ever widening circles outward from my grandmother's house, through the streets and alleys of the South End. I was now in the position of the explorer, Eduardo the faithful guide. I wanted to make a movie of what I saw, but since my money

was limited, I would have to be discriminating about what I committed to film. I decided to wait until Eduardo had shown me around the area thoroughly before I shot anything.

Tremont Street, just up the block from my grandmother's, was wide and loud, full of people and traffic, the noise of construction, horns and buses. I felt dazed when I stood and watched the street life surging around me. Off to the left, Eduardo said, was Roxbury. To the right was downtown; straight ahead, the Back Bay. Roxbury sounded exotic, but Eduardo explained that almost everyone in Roxbury was Black and that he was afraid to go there. "Especially at night," he said. "It's not safe at night. People get killed." We would walk toward Roxbury a block or so, Eduardo glancing over at me every few steps, and I would mentally catalogue the sights: the old men shuffling along the sidewalk, mumbling to themselves, their clothes dirty and loose, their bodies sour; people sitting on the stoops of decrepit townhouses or empty shells of buildings; groups of older boys and girls, Puerto Rican and white, and a few Black, girls leaning against boys, all of them smoking, lazily drinking sodas or from bottles in paper bags. Sometimes one of them would recognize Eduardo and call him Fatty or Bookworm, although Eduardo didn't seem to mind the names. Occasionally, off in some side alley or the dark recesses of a burned-out building whose windows and doors were broken open, we would see furtive shapes moving, stumbling, sometimes a man and a woman together. At times

like this I felt the thrill of the forbidden, sensed that sexual things were happening, but Eduardo never wanted to linger. Once a man stopped us to ask us for the time and then started talking to us about where we lived and what grade we were in. He made both of us nervous, and when he leaned close to Eduardo and asked if we would like to come over to his house to have a soda, Eduardo called him a faggot and ran off and I followed. We ran half a block, threading our way between people on the sidewalk, then crossed the street. When we stopped to look back, the man, who had looked normal enough to me, was gone.

We made forays downtown, walking down Tremont or Washington Streets and taking the subway back home because Eduardo got tired. So much of the city stank of garbage and urine and dead things in alleys, the exhaust from buses and cars, odors coming up out of the sewers. Eduardo seemed used to it, but I had to hold my breath or pinch my nose shut and hurry to the next block. Downtown was a different world. The black and brown and yellow faces of the South End gradually began to fade, and the jeans and polyester and sweatsuits and old formless dresses and baggy jackets became suits and ties, fashionable clothes, shining shoes. We went into the record shops, bookstores and the places that sold army surplus equipment. At the department stores we rode the escalators up and down between the floors until the security people began to watch us and eventually asked us to leave. I enjoyed walking

through the crowded aisles. There were girls and women everywhere smelling of perfume, soap, and shampoo. I brushed against women and tried to overhear what they were saying. I wanted something to happen, something improbable involving sex, but I didn't know what that would be or how to arrange it.

My father called every few days, and each time my grandmother would be standing next to the bed or hovering nearby in the kitchen, so I couldn't tell him exactly what I was thinking. And I had gotten used to things a little, I wasn't as anguished as that first time we talked, so it became harder to say what I had planned to tell him about that night in the apartment when I had gotten so mad. We both acted as though it hadn't happened and our conversations avoided mentioning it. "How's it going?" my father would ask. "Fine," I'd answer. Things weren't all fine, but they were better and I was beginning to get used to the strangeness. "You eating okay?" "Yeah." Although I was getting tired of the same things, day after day. I only now realized how lucky I was, having a father who owned a restaurant. "You making any friends?" "Yeah, Eduardo. And Harold and Charley Brown and Spider. Benny, too." "That's your cousin, right?" "Yeah." I didn't know why I included Benny among my friends, or any of the others beside Eduardo, for that matter. It was the habit of being polite that he had taught me. It had gotten to the point where telling people what they liked to

hear made me feel good. Then it would be my turn to ask the questions. "Did they fix the house yet?" "No. Maybe in a few weeks." "How's business?" "Oh, pretty good." Then a risky question I didn't feel all too comfortable asking: "Did -- did Tony come back with the money?" "No." The first few calls I wanted to ask when I could come home, but remembering what I had said to him I felt embarrassed about asking the question. And then, when he didn't mention it, I figured I had my answer.

Eduardo and I were in the little backyard behind the house trying to figure out some way to make a movie. Since it was just the two of us, and I had to operate the camera, we really couldn't do anything that involved people. I didn't have any toys with me and Eduardo's were at his house. I asked him if maybe he could go and get some soldiers or GI Joes, but he was reluctant. He said he didn't have many toys, and if he lost them his parents wouldn't be able to buy him any new ones. I thought back to all the toys I had burned and felt like a jerk .

"Maybe we can use some bugs or something," Eduardo suggested.

I didn't bother telling him how stupid the idea was. I remembered the money I still had. I could buy some plastic soldiers for a dollar. The window above us opened and my grandmother stuck her head out.

"Hey!" She leaned over and spit carefully. "I need you to go downtown and get my watch fixed," she said.

"Right now?"

"After lunch."

"Can I go?" Eduardo said.

My grandmother shrugged. "I don't care."

"Hey," I said to Eduardo. "We can take the camera with us."

"Yeah!"

My grandmother started to close the window, then leaned back out.

"Benny's going with you," she said. A knot of apprehension tightened in my stomach and I started when she slammed the window shut. "Shit."

"Pee Wee," Benny said.

He was sprawled on the front steps smoking a cigarette and watching people on the street. He didn't turn to look at me or Eduardo. We stood a few feet away, out of reach. Benny looked at the camera hanging from my wrist by its strap. "What's that for?"

"I don't know. Just to shoot some stuff. In case there's something interesting."

"Always something interesting if you know where to look."

The swelling had gone down in his face and he was wearing just the vertical splint and bandage on his nose. He looked younger now, more his age.

"You're the guy from the grocery store," Eduardo said.

Benny turned on his elbow and just stared at him for a second, then turned his attention back to the street. Suddenly he sat up and pointed with his cigarette down the street.

"Hey!" he yelled. "Hey!"

Eduardo and I looked to where he was pointing. A small man was walking hurriedly away.

"Yeah, go on, motherfucker!" Benny yelled. "Run, motherfucker!" And the man did indeed start running. Benny laughed and stood up, flicking the cigarette away and smirking at us. "Motherfucker owes me twenty dollars," he said. "I loaned it to him because we were in the shit together. No interest loan, you know. But the motherfucker won't pay me back. That shit ain't right." He nodded to himself, then started down the steps. "Come on."

Eduardo looked at me. "The shit?" he said. "What's that mean?"

"Who knows," I said. I sighed. "Come on." We followed Benny down the steps.

Benny didn't believe in taking the subway. "I ain't going underground no more except to stay, if you know what I mean," he said. "I been in plenty

enough tunnels in Vietnam." We walked along beside him, trying to measure our pace to his. He had a swaying walk, and we found ourselves going either too fast or too slow. He would speed up a little and then slow down to watch someone walking across the street. Or if a woman passed us going in the other direction, he would slow down, ogling her, and turn to watch her pass.

Invariably he said something but all the women ignored him. It was no wonder. He had combed his long, wavy hair back and tucked it behind his ears, but it was slowly working its way forward and out to the sides so that it hung in lank tendrils along the sides of his face. His jeans were splattered with streaks of paint and smudged in the ass and the faded black t-shirt and scuffed denim jacket he wore looked like they hadn't been washed in a long time.

"Where the hell we going, anyway?" Benny asked.

I fished the paper out of my pocket. My grandmother had told me not to tell Benny about the watch until we got to the shop. "He's always looking for stuff to hock," she said. "You go with him so you can find the way when you have to go back and pick it up for me."

I read the address. "Summer Street," I said.

"What's the name of the business?"

"I don't know. She just gave me this address."

"What you supposed to do there?"

I knew I shouldn't say anything. I just looked at him.

"I know where Summer Street is," Eduardo said. "Come on." He started across the street and I followed him.

"Hey, wait. Wait," Benny said.

We ran across the street just as the light changed and waited there for Benny, who gave us a foul look from the opposite corner. He crossed the street against the light, holding his hand out to stop the cars and flipping off the cab that honked its horn at him repeatedly.

"What are you, wise guys or something?" he asked us.

"You walk too slow," Eduardo said.

"Shut up, Spic, I ain't talking to you," Benny said.

Eduardo looked at his feet and kicked at something on the sidewalk.

"I told you about her," Benny said. "She's always pulling some shit. What did she tell you to do?"

I started walking backward up the street. Eduardo fell in beside me. Here, in the crowded streets of downtown, we could lose Benny and find our own way to the watch repair shop. If Benny kept it up, that's what we would do.

"I'll tell you when we get there," I said.

I thought Benny would curse me and start chasing us. I was ready to run. But he just shook his head and loped after us.

"Man," Benny said. "I tell you ..." He didn't say anything else. Eduardo and I walked on together.

Benny laughed when we reached the watch repair shop. He laughed again, harder, when I handed the modest Timex over to the man behind the counter. I explained the problem to the repairman, who paid me only partial attention, concentrating instead on Benny who was moving up and down the store inspecting watches and jewelry in glass cases. The man said something over his shoulder and a young man came from the back of the store.

Benny sneered as the young man approached. "I'll be waiting outside," he said, holding his hands up and slowly turning toward the door, acting as though he were being arrested, "where I won't be a 'suspicious' character." He shot a dirty look at the man behind the counter, who finished filling out the repair form.

"Two weeks," the man said.

Eduardo motioned me over to a display case. Inside were various large watches with numerous dials and numbers. "This one here," Eduardo said, pointing to one that had a large face encircled by a red dial, "is one that explorers use. It's got a compass, and it's waterproof, and it tells the barometric pressure." Eduardo smiled at me as though he were about to be outfitted for an expedition to the Amazon. I smiled back.

We met Benny outside and walked to the Common, where we bought hotdogs from a vendor with the few dollars my grandmother had given us. The day was hot and dry, the sky cloudless. People sprawled on the grass, sunned

themselves on benches. Crowds of children and mothers played in and around the fountains in the center of the park. We ate our hotdogs on a patch of grass under a tree.

"You miss California?" Benny asked me.

"Sure," I said.

"Like what? What do you miss?"

"I don't know. My friends. Baseball. My father."

"The Chinaman?"

I was surprised that Benny knew anything about me.

"Man, I tell you," Benny said, "us Cape Verdeans is something else.

Getting married to all kinds of different people -- Chinks, Kikes, Spics, niggers, Wops, you name it. That's cause we're so good looking. Everybody wants us."

"I thought we were Portuguese," I said.

"Yeah," he said, "we're Portuguese from the Cape Verde Islands. Shit, you didn't know that?"

"No one told me."

"Well, now you know."

I had never heard of these islands before. I turned to Eduardo, but he was staring off into the sky. These islands had to be close to Portugal.

"Where are they?" I asked. "Where are the islands?"

"Shit, you don't know nothing, do you?"

"Are they next to Portugal?"

"They're next to Africa. Colonies of Portugal."

"Africa?"

"Yeah, Pee Wee. How'd you think we got these year-round tans?" He looked at me and raised an eyebrow. "Huh? We're creoles, mixed. Portuguese and African. You ain't never heard that?"

I shook my head. African. That meant Black. That was what we were? No, that wasn't right. My father always said Portuguese. Just Portuguese.

Benny finished his hot dog and sat back on the bench, spreading his legs out. Two young women walked briskly by on the path in front of us. Benny nudged me with his elbow and nodded to them. "Hello, sweethearts!" he said. "Beautiful day, isn't it? Just like you. Do you come here often?"

The women looked, then quickly turned away. They picked up their pace.

"That's right, shake it up, girls! Shake it, shake it, shake it!" He laughed and turned to me. "White girls!" he said. "They act like they could do without it, but they're just like all the rest."

Eduardo stole a quick glance at the retreating figure of the women and then turned to me, his expression seeming to ask, What's the point of talking about girls and women like this? *It*, I wanted to tell him. Sex. Still, I was embarrassed, too. I wanted to change the subject. The only thing I could think of to talk about was my father.

"You know my father?" I asked Benny.

Benny was looking away from us, toward the Public Gardens on the other side of the Common. Over by the softball fields in between the Common and the Public Garden there was a commotion of some sort, a swirling group of people. "Yeah, sure," Benny said. "Hi and bye, yeah; I know him. I was at the wedding. You was nothing but a little shit." Benny turned back to me briefly, then looked away. "Snot-faced little runt. Your mother kept worrying because you had this runny nose and you kept wiping it on the sleeve of this little monkey suit they rented for you."

I don't know if I actually remembered something of that day or was just making it up from the photographs I saw, but I pictured sunshine and flowers and the high, vaulted ceiling of a dark church. Kids my age were running loose while I was always in someone's grasp.

"Hey," I said, "when's the last time you saw her?"

Benny didn't turn around. He was intent on the crowd.

"My mother," I said, reaching out and taking his arm. I was suddenly afraid of the hard muscle under my hand, the heat of Benny's bare skin. I pulled my hand back. "When was the last time you saw her?"

Benny moved up and forward toward the crowd without bothering to look back at us. "Come on," he said. "Let's see what's going on."

I scrambled after him, stopping after a few feet to look back at Eduardo, who was still sitting on the bench. I motioned for him follow, but didn't wait to see if he got up from the bench. Benny was already halfway down the hill. I jogged after him.

"Motherfuckers," Benny said. He said the word without vehemence.

The crowd turned out to be two roughly equal groups, no more than a hundred or so on either side, facing each other with homemade signs and placards. It was about the war. There were as many women as men in the anti-war group; a lot of them were hippies, I figured. They wore tie-dye shirts, fringed leather vests, headbands. A crowd of men faced them. Most of them looked like construction workers and college students.

"You think it's about the war?" Eduardo said.

"It ain't about the Red Sox," Benny said.

I didn't care one way or the other about the war. My real interest in war was World War II. You could buy World War II models and soldiers and you could reenact battles. The current war was just something you watched other people get excited about, something that you saw on the news at night. Still, this was real, and I could perhaps use footage like this later on. I decided I liked the protestors' side because they had women. Eduardo seemed faintly disgusted by the whole thing. He stood a few steps back, looking as though he were preparing to turn and run.

The people were shouting and pointing in each other's faces. The groups looked like the ameobas I had seen under the microscope in science last year, two blobs moving toward and away from each other, their shapes bending to accomodate each other when they touched. Other people were arriving to watch the confrontation, a lunchtime theatrical performance. The police were trying to keep the two groups separated. A half dozen police on horseback arrived from the direction of Tremont Street.

"Motherfuckers," Benny said again. I didn't know if he meant the pro-war protestors, the anti-protestors or the police.

I started filming the protest, beginning on the anti-war side and panning left. It was an overcast day, just enough sun. I zoomed in on a meaty-faced construction worker. The man, dressed in work pants and a sleeveless t-shirt, had a huge belly, but his arms were solidly muscled, and when he shook his fist at the hippies, his upper arms didn't wobble with fat. I swung the camera back to the hippies and focused on a thin woman dressed like an Indian in a fringed leather vest and bell bottoms. Her long black hair was kept in place with a multi-colored cloth headband. She was hopping and yelling and carrying a sign that was out of the frame. I pressed the button to reverse the zoom when the view through the lens went dark and Benny was pulling me roughly by the arm.

"Watch out! Back up!"

I pulled the camera from my face and saw the hide and wide rump of a gigantic police horse bobbing above me. The cop on the horse, fighting with the reins and trying to keep the animal from moving forward, seemed equally gigantic. I could smell the powerful stink of the animal, the sweat and the manure, and shrank back.

"Better watch what you're doing and forget about that camera," Benny said.

I moved back a few more steps. I filmed the horse and the cop and then filmed Benny shouting at the protestors.

"Hey! Motherfuckers, I was there! I was there, baby! I was there!" He was shouting it at both sides with equal passion, spit flying from his lips.

Then the noise began to change, and I turned the camera back to the crowd to find that it was moving off away from us behind a line of police horses and foot patrolmen. There were police cars on the asphalt paths at the other side of the playing fields, some paddy wagons, too.

"Party's over, brother," I heard someone say.

A short, barrel-chested black man stood off to one side of us looking at the retreating line of police horses. He wore a purple scarf pulled tightly over his head and tied in a knot at the back of his skull, pressing down his matted mass of his hair. He was dressed in a dark blue long-sleeved shirt open midway

down his chest, a black leather vest, dark jeans and worn black combat boots.

A metal hook protruded from his left sleeve, dull metal hooks that looked cold.

"Yeah, party's over, baby," the man said.

"Shit," Benny said. "Party never got started. Not here."

"Got that right," the man said. "The party never got started."

Benny stared at the man's hook and nodded.

"Did you -- did you lose your hand in the war?" Eduardo asked.

I was surprised that he had spoken and, apparently, so was Eduardo. He blinked at the man and we all looked at him for a second. The black man scowled at him, raised his hook to Eduardo's eye level. "I didn't lose shit, Pee-Wee, you hear what I'm saying? You lose a dog or your car keys or a girlfriend. Motherfucking Charlie took my shit, you understand? AK-motherfucking-47. Wasn't no losing involved."

Eduardo was immobile as the man spoke, except for his eyes, which blinked rapidly as though the veteran's words were small pebbles thrown against his face. His mouth remained slightly opened.

"I got the party right here," Benny said, patting his pants pocket. "Come on."

"All right now," the man said, following Benny. Eduardo and I lagged behind.

We sat atop the burial mound in the colonial cemetery amid the tombstones, with a clear view of every approach. There was no need to worry about the police, Benny said, because they were all over on the other side of the Common, at the demonstration. He pulled a fat joint out of his coat pocket, straightened it carefully and lit it with a lighter the man handed him.

Eduardo and I stood off to Benny's side as he sucked on the joint, snorted, and passed it to the other man. The wind shifted and I turned my face away from the acrid smoke. Ryan had talked about trying marijuana and how Nick would sometimes bring some home, but I had never seen a joint before. I watched Benny's face as he grimaced and fought to hold his breath. When he finally blew the smoke out he seemed to deflate like a balloon. He leaned back against a headstone and stared off into the distance.

I wasn't afraid of Benny right now. It seemed that when there were other people around, Benny protected me. I crouched down beside a tombstone and motioned for Eduardo to sit next to me.

Eduardo made a face and joined me. "My mom's going to be looking for me," Eduardo said softly. "I gotta get going soon."

"Don't you want to hear him tell about his arm?" I asked. Eduardo shrugged and started scratching at the tombstone between us, his fingernails chk-chk-chking on the lichen-covered granite.

"Well, train me, then, man!" is what I said!" the Black man said. He shook his head and stared at the joint. "Shit." He sucked on the joint and handed it back to Benny and spoke holding his breath. "Man, they don't want to train no vet, nobody like me, because they sure as hell don't want to hire me permanent after they done trained me. My arm gives them an easy excuse." He blew out the smoke and lifted his hook. "Can't operate the machinery.' Shit, you ought to see the old dumb fat half-blind white motherfuckers they got 'operating the machinery.' Hell, if a one-armed man can't do it! Shit. Fuck that and methadone!" The black man laughed and passed Benny the joint. It was the saddest laugh I had ever heard, and when the man looked over at me, he kept laughing, but he looked angry. "What's your gig, man?" he asked Benny.

Benny finished off the joint, flipped away the remnant and stared after it meditatively while he held the smoke in. "I got this and that going," he said, exhaling. "I do some shit for this businessman around the way. Work for my grandmother. All under the table, you know? I ain't paying Uncle Sam shit. I already paid Uncle Sam everything he's going to get from me."

"You know that's right," the man said.

"My grandmother owns this house," Benny said. He jerked a thumb at me. "Pee-Wee here lives there too, don't you?" I didn't answer and Benny went on. "Boarding house. All kinds of tenants. I keep them in line, you know? Rent on time, keep their shit together, no fucking up the property."

"The Enforcer!" the black man said.

"Yeah," Benny said. "That's me."

"All right, now," the man said. "Put some of that extra special training Uncle Sam gave you to work."

"Shit," Benny said. "Uncle Sam."

I was tired of crouching behind Benny and the other vet, so I sat down, even though it gave me the creeps to be sitting on a grave. Eduardo leaned against the tombstone and gave me a pained look. I wanted to leave, too -- part of me did, at least. The other part wanted to stay and watch the one-armed man.

Benny looked at me. "Uncle Sam ever wants you, you run, understand Pee-Wee?"

"Like to Canada?" I answered.

"Canada or the Congo or the fuck someplace. Or maybe if enough of you Pee-Wees and other little G.I. Joes did a suicide mission this shit would come to an end. Run to old Uncle Sam booby-trapped!"

"Yeah," the black man said. "Ha!" He rubbed his hand over the bandana on his head and turned his shining dark face to me. "V.C. special. One time this V.C. bitch came out of this ville, out of nowhere, with a grenade in either hand, and she wasn't throwing them, neither. Shit. Victor Charlie got balls; his bitches, too."

Eduardo suddenly perked up. "We're not going to win, are we?" he said.

Benny snorted and just stared ahead of him. The black man laughed. "I hope not," he said. "What the fuck we got to teach them? The *man* just wants to make more niggers, is all. Niggers of the world unite!"

"Made you wonder sometimes, didn't it?" Benny said.

"Only when they wasn't trying to zap my ass. Otherwise, I let my trigger finger do the wondering." The black man pantomimed firing a rifle. He fired at the sun, at the trees, at traffic, at the buildings on Arlington Street, at the tombstones. He finally turned to me and smiled. "That's the way it goes, Pee-Wee. Got to keep your finger on the trigger when you're nothing but a nigger."

Benny grunted and stood up. "We gotta go," he said.

"Gotta get back to enforcin' for Grandma!" the black man said.

"Yeah, something like that," Benny said. "Come on, Pee Wee."

Eduardo and I stood and followed Benny.

"Hey, man, you ever need any help, you know, doing shit, I'm at the Clarendon Street Hotel," the black man said. "Franklin Cooper, that's me. People call me Coop. Coop, man, that's me."

We climbed down from the raised mound. I looked back and saw Franklin Cooper holding his hook up in a motionless wave.

On the way back to the house Benny stopped at a liquor store and bought a quart of malt liquor, which he drank from a paper bag as we walked. I

thought he might offer me a drink, but he didn't turn to me or say anything.

Eduardo trailed behind us. I still wanted to ask Benny about my mother, but I didn't, couldn't.

"That guy was scary," Eduardo said.

"His arm was scary," I said. I didn't want to admit to being scared, not in front of Benny, but I also didn't want to make Eduardo think I was ignoring him.

"You don't know what scary is," Benny said.

We reached Upton Street. Benny tossed the bottle aside into gutter.

A new white Cadillac came up the one-way street toward us as we turned onto Upton Street. Benny stopped and stared at the car as it suddenly sped up. It barely slowed at the stop sign on the corner, slicing out into traffic with squealing wheels. Benny stood looking after the Caddy, one hand on his hip. Eduardo and I waited for him a few paces ahead. When Benny finally turned back to us, his eyes met mine for a second, then he quickly looked away, up the street.

There was a man waiting for us on the front steps, a thin white guy about Benny's age. His face was pocked and scarred, and he had a scraggly beard and mustache. He wore a Red Sox hat pulled down low on his forehead. "Been waiting for you for over an hour, man," the white guy said.

"Had shit to do," Benny said. He stopped on the first step next to the man.

"You guys go on."

I started up the steps. Eduardo kept on walking down the sidewalk.

"I gotta go home," he said. "I'll come by tomorrow, okay?"

"Sure," I said. I climbed the stairs to the front door and unlocked it. Benny watched me, waiting for me to leave before he said anything else. I closed the door and went into the living room through the side door, but I peeked out the blinds.

Benny and the man talked for a few minutes. Just when I was getting bored watching them, the white man stood up and handed Benny something. Money. Benny counted it there on the steps, put it in his pocket. The man checked his watch. Benny nodded to him. When the man moved off, Benny stood watching him, then walked up the steps to the front door. I heard him whistling as he went up to his room.

Every night as I lay on the sofa, trying to sleep, I heard sirens from the police and fire stations just up Tremont Street, but that night the blating horns of the ladder trucks and the piercing police sirens filled the living room with their wails. I had been lying in the dark, running through my mind what Benny had said about what we were. Portuguese and African. Why hadn't my father ever told me? What did it mean? I couldn't get beyond the question. After the first two trucks went thundering by, I got up and went to the window, but even pressing my face hard against the screen I could barely see to the corner,

where red lights flashed against the window of the small market on the corner.

They were the lights of the passing fire engines and not the glow of flames.

Then even more engines barrelled down Tremont and I felt myself tremble. I wanted to see the flames. I counted the rumblings of at least a dozen engines. It had to be a huge fire. I could see my house burning again, see my father's disbelieving, hurt look when I lied and said it was my idea to burn something in the garage. But it was such a -- Ryan's word came to me -- rush, such a rush to see the flames, to smell the different burning things, to hear the rushing whoosh of the fire, the crackling and exploding, the music of destruction.

"Hey, Rory." My grandmother stood at the door to her bedroom in a nightgown. "Where's the fire?"

"I can't tell. Down Tremont Street, I think."

"Damned fires breaking out everywhere." She took a long drink from her glass. "Get Benny and go up and see where it is."

"Go up?"

"On the roof. Might spread, never know. The wind turns and fire moves like that." She made a quick sideways motion with her hand. "Seen it happen when I lived in New York City before the war. One minute it's over there, then before you know it -- shoosh!" She drank again. "Go check."

I started to look for my clothes.

"Ain't nobody going to see you in your pajamas," she said. "Just go on up."

"Okay." I felt her standing there watching me for a few seconds as I slipped my feet into my sneakers, but when I looked up she had closed her door.

When I got out into the hallway, I heard the faint sound of people talking in the street in front of the house. I climbed the stairs in the dim light to the second floor. Holding my breath, I leaned against the door and listened before I knocked. I didn't hear anything from within, but when I lightly rapped on the door it swung open almost instantly and Benny was standing there with a joint clenched in his teeth and a bottle of wine in his hand.

"Ain't it past your bedtime, Pee Wee?"

"The fire trucks woke me up," I explained. "Nana said for us to go up on the roof and see where the fire is."

Benny shook his head and laughed out some smoke. "Man," he said, drawing the word out, "she ought to worry about something that makes some sense. These houses are all brick. There ain't gonna be no fire spreading to brick." The bottle of wine swung before me as Benny gestured with it.

"I don't know, that's just what she said."

"She's probably just getting you to run up to the roof to see if you'll do it. She's got you trained like a little monkey." Benny took a long hit off the joint. I looked into the dark room behind him. There were Playboy pinups on one of the walls, but the room was so dark that I couldn't get a good look at them. His

bed was in the far corner near the window that looked out over Upton Street. Beside it on the floor I could see a hotplate, and at the foot of the bed was a military footlocker painted in psychedelic colors.

"You get high, Pee Wee?" Benny said. "You want a hit off this shit?"

"No."

"Drink of wine?"

I shrugged. I could taste the sloe gin fizzes Ryan and I used to make, could remember the off-balance feeling the alcohol gave me, but I didn't want to appear too eager.

"Cuz drinks wine!" Benny said. "You drink wine from hanging around with those winos downstairs, or is this a California thing you picked up out there?"

"Sometimes I drink stuff with my friend," I said.

Benny took a swig from the bottle and held it out to me. "Knock yourself out, cumad, go ahead."

I took the bottle. I wanted to wipe the mouth off, but I put it directly to my lips and drank. The wine was tart and warm. I struggled to gulp down a few burning swallows.

Benny laughed. "All right, Pee Wee," he said. "Let's go up and see if the world is coming to an end."

The roof was a strange landscape of black shapes and shadows. My first step sent a bottle clinking away over the gravel. I saw the dark suggestion of the other roofs in the row of townhouses silhouetted against the overcast sky faintly purple, then turned and saw the Prudential Building and the John Hancock lit up against the darkness. And in the other direction the intense orange-and-red glow of the fire.

"Watch your step," Benny said. "All kinds of shit up here."

He led the way to the edge of the roof, where we looked over into the street below. Turning slightly aside, he handed me the bottle of wine without looking at me. I took a small drink, then a larger one. The wine didn't seem to be burning as much. I held onto the bottle with both hands, looking at the fire's glow, then let it dangle from my fingers as Benny had done.

Benny rocked on his heels, his arms at his sides, then slowly raised them, reaching toward the glow, spreading his fingers wide.

"Benny?"

"Yeah?"

"If we're African, how much are we?"

"What's the matter? You been thinking about that all day?"

"Kind of."

"Who knows? A little, a lot. What difference does it make? What we are is Cape Verdean, you don't break it down from there. That's what white people do. We are what we are. That bother you?"

"No," I said. But I wasn't sure. This morning I was Portuguese, tonight I was something different.

"How far away do you think the fire is?" I asked.

"Looks like two, three blocks," Benny said.

We listened. We couldn't hear voices or the fire, just the sound of the machines and the sirens. I looked around, my eyes adjusted to the dark now, and saw here and there other people up on their roofs. I remembered all the people back home who had stood out in the street and watched my house burn. People liked fires, maybe as much as I did. Who knows? As long as there were people like me around who liked to set them, they wouldn't have to. They could just enjoy the fires I made. What a silly idea. I snorted.

"What's so funny?" Benny said.

I was about to say nothing when I realized that I was the one who had laughed. I shook my head. It felt larger, like I had a head outside of my head, or was wearing a football helmet, and part of me was removed from myself just that much, a couple of inches. There was me, and then there was this other almost-me. I laughed again.

"Huh?" Benny asked.

I remembered that I had been asked a question. I couldn't now remember why exactly I had laughed the first time, but I knew it had to do with fire.

"I burned my house down," I said. "Did you know that?"

"Yeah, I heard something about that," Benny said. "Gimme that." He snatched the bottle back from me and looked at it, but didn't take a drink. "You think that's funny? Burning down your house?"

I hadn't expected the tone of Benny's voice. "Not funny," I said, "just, I don't know, it was just something that happened." I listened to the fire engines and waited for Benny to say something, but he didn't answer. "These guys, one of them is my friend, they were messing around burning things and they started it. It wasn't me, really. I didn't do it."

"They just came in your house and burned it down," Benny said. "You what, opened the door and let them in?"

"No, it wasn't like that." I told him the story. "They sneaked in."

"But you just let them burn shit. You just watched."

I felt stupid. There was nothing I could say.

"So why'd you say you did it?"

Benny drained the bottle and without a word or warning, he cocked his arm back and threw it down into the street, as far toward Tremont Street as he could. I lost the bottle in the darkness, but we both heard it shatter. I wanted to run, thinking that someone down there in the street would know where the

bottle came from and we would get in trouble, but Benny's nonchalance assured me that there was nothing to worry about. The fear passed, and then I wanted to throw a bottle myself.

"I – I didn't want my friend to get in trouble. And – and, I don't know, there were these other guys there who might get in trouble, too."

"Yeah? What about you? You got in trouble."

"Not as much as Ryan would have. His father can be pretty mean."

"How about your old man? Didn't he do anything to you?"

I looked around for a bottle to throw. I saw a bottle shape a few feet away and went to retrieve it. I picked it up and brought it back to where Benny stood.

"He was mad," I said, "but he didn't give me a beating or anything."

"Maybe he should have. Better than sending you here."

"It's not that bad," I said.

"What's he like? The Chinaman."

"My dad? He's okay. He's at work a lot. He's not like a lot of my friends' dads. He doesn't get really mad at things."

"He ain't never gotten married again? You don't have a mother?"

"I have a mother."

"Yeah, who's that?"

"My mother."

He laughed and then started coughing. "Shit. The mother who ran off and left you with the Chinaman? That mother? That the one you're talking about?"

"She's still my mother," I said. "She'll come back one day." I don't know why I said that; it just came out.

Benny laughed. "She left because she didn't want to be bothered with you. Why do you think she's going to come back?"

"Because she will, that's why."

"Yeah? Well, I don't know what fairy tales you been reading, but this ain't one of them. She's gone, been long gone, and she ain't never, ever coming back."

I felt my face and head get hot. I threw the bottle as hard as I could. It arced higher over the tree than Benny's had. I strained to hear it shatter, to explode and deafen us both, but I heard nothing.

"Good throw, Pee Wee."

Benny left me there and walked back to the skylight and crawled down into the house. I remained on the roof and stared at the glowing fire.

CHAPTER TEN

I went into the kitchen one afternoon where my grandmother was working away over a large steaming pot of munchoup, a Cape Verdean stew made out of pork shoulder, dried corn called *samp*, tomatoes, onions, cabbage and spices. She cooked it about once every two weeks, making a large kettle of it, and the leftovers lasted for three days, even with the boarders eating it for dinner. I had been leery of it at first. The name sounded funny and the pot was a big bubbling confusion of colors and shapes that didn't look like any kind of meal my father made, but when she gave me a little bit in a bowl to taste, I liked it. This munchoup, though, wasn't for the boarders, but the Fourth of July party the next day down on the Cape in Onset. It was a Creole party, my grandmother said. "Party for Cape Verdeans," she said.

She said everybody made food and a band would play songs from the old country and it would last all day long. There would be people there who hadn't seen me in years, not since I was little. Cousins and aunts and uncles and kids I used to play with. I couldn't remember anybody from those days, not their names, not their faces. Maybe she thought I would be excited, but the idea of meeting all those strangers made me feel anxious.

Soon we were on the road, headed for the Cape. My grandmother's car was a pale blue Cadillac Eldorado, the paint bleached so light by the sun and washings that it looked almost grey. It was a monstrous machine, the longest car I had ever seen, like something out of a cartoon, all angles and rust-pocked chrome. The leather interior was still intact and supple, although the carpet on the floor was worn down to threads in places. The back seat was big enough for me to lie down on without touching my head or my feet to the doors. When I piled into the back seat ahead of Harold and Mr. Milo Poong and waited for everyone to get in, I noticed that the car didn't sink under their weight as they climbed in like it would have in our Beetle back home. Benny got behind the wheel and turned the key repeatedly before the engine turned over. Sputtering, the car lurched out into the street.

We moved through the South End like a shark on wheels, nosing around double-parked cars and pedestrians, Benny seemingly unwilling to come to a complete stop for anything. He goosed the accelerator and we surged down the street as he flipped the dial through every radio station in Boston and then back down the band again.

"Shit, ain't nothing worth listening to," he said.

He reached for the switch for the air conditioner.

"Nah ah," my grandmother said. "We're still in the city. You wait until we get out on the highway. Uses the engine too much when you're driving like this."

"It don't use nothing no more than it does anyway," Benny said. "It's frigging a hundred degrees outside."

Benny always seemed to be too hot, and a hundred degrees was the temperature he always claimed it to be. Today, though, it felt like he was right. It was one of those muggy days when you felt as though you had poured hot water on your clothes.

"Hundred degrees!" my grandmother said, strangely enthusiastic. "That's like Africa!"

"That's like down South," Harold said.

"Who asked you?" Benny said.

"I was just joining the conversation."

"Yeah, well, ain't that great for you." Benny lit a cigarette and the smoke washed back over me. He held the cigarette out the window and ashes blew back into my hair.

"Down South?" my grandmother said. "Where you been down South, Harold Davenport?"

"Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia -- all those places," he said.

"Riding the rails?" my grandmother said, hardly able to speak for laughing.

"You're always so poor, I can't imagine you making it any other way!"

"I was in the Army," Harold said. "Basic training during the war. I guess they wanted us to get a feel for what it was like in the South Pacific."

"Don't go telling no war stories," Benny said. "I'm not going to sit here and listen to some fucking bullshit Uncle Sam flag shit about fighting Japanese or nobody else. You hear?"

"I'm not ashamed of what I did," Harold said. He looked over at me, a sad expression on his face.

"Yeah, well maybe you should be. Maybe if people was ashamed of all that Big One bullshit, we wouldn't be in Vietnam dropping bombs on kids."

"The Japanese dropped bombs on kids. They did horrible things," Harold said.

"Yeah, to the fucking Chinese," Benny said.

"And us, too."

"Maybe we was in the wrong place, you ever think about that? What the fuck we doing in Hawaii? You ever think about that one? Who invited Uncle Sam to take over Hawaii?"

"It is true that the Japanese committed war crimes against the Chinese and others," Mr. Milo Poong said, "but what nation is without its dark moments? We all, at one time or another, act like barbarians."

"Except the Swiss," Harold Davenport said.

"Yes, I suppose so," Mr. Milo Poong said, "but I'm sure if you go back far enough you'll probably find that they, too, had their bad moments."

"How's about a moment of silence out of all of you?" my grandmother said. "You're about to drive me nuts. Look at Rory, there, he's almost climbing out the window to get away from all this foolishness."

I wasn't leaning out the window because of the conversation, but to get away from the smoke from Benny's cigarette, which was sucked back into the car. I looked up into the girders and rails of the elevated as we sailed down Washington Street toward the expressway. We travelled along through a checkerboard pattern of light and dark. Above us a train rumbled, clacking and shaking.

"You better put your head in before the pigeons shit on you," Benny said, "cuz I ain't stopping for you to clean it off. You'll have to go to the party that way."

I pulled myself back into the car. I didn't want to make a spectacle of myself at the party. We made a turn, sailed down a side street, and then the expressway came into view.

When we finally got on the expressway and my grandmother was satisfied that we were at the right cruising speed, she let Benny turn on the air conditioner and we travelled in chilled style. Benny tried the radio again and found a soul station he liked. No one talked about politics or war. I played one of my favorite, if childish, car games -- imagining other cars to be fighter planes

that I shot down with my .50 caliber machine guns. Thunderbirds and Novas and Buicks went down in flames. Next to me Harold Davenport dozed and slept leaning against my shoulder. Mr. Milo Poong kept up a running commentary on the sights we passed, how he would paint different views, the nature of the lighting on buildings, marshes, pine forests.

The towns of Onset and Wareham lie snuggled together on the southeastern coast of Massachusetts, just before the Cape Cod canal. The Cranberry Highway runs behind them both, taking the traffic straight through to Buzzards Bay and the Cape proper. My grandmother directed Benny to get off the highway and ride through Wareham to Onset.

"What for?" Benny said. "That's just more traffic."

"Because I want to show him something," my grandmother said. She didn't say who the "him" was, but I figured it was me.

We got off the highway and went through town. "Now we're a tour bus," Benny said.

"We're whatever I want to be," my grandmother said. "I'm the boss."

Through Wareham and then into Onset itself my grandmother pointed out places to me that she thought I should remember from my childhood, like my pediatrician's office and the A&P where she used to buy me popsicles and the Ben Franklin where my mother would buy my toys, but nothing looked familiar.

I wanted to remember these places, to feel attached, but nothing registered.

Benny even chimed in a couple of times to try and remind me of something.

I did notice that there were plenty of people around like me, brown people of every possible shade, some so much lighter than me that they were practically white, others darker than many black people I knew. Were they all Cape Verdeans? My grandmother waved to people and when they looked and waved back, they would suddenly break out into a grin and wave excitedly. Cape Verdeans were coming out of stores, pulling into parking spaces, crossing the street ahead of us. I would fit right in here; no one would ask me about the color of my skin, or whether my father was really my father. It wouldn't be a complicated thing to be brown here; it wouldn't be a problem.

"Shit," Benny said. "This looks like it might be some kind of party this year. Might be something going on."

We had reached the outskirts of Onset, and traffic was backed up on the two-lane road.

"Everybody's going to be here," my grandmother said.

Everyone. My mother? I still hadn't asked my grandmother if she knew where my mother was, especially since Benny had said what he did about her on the roof. It just hadn't occurred to me that she would be at a party like this. Maybe if she knew I was coming -- maybe what? Maybe she wouldn't show up.

Cars were parked along both sides of Onset Avenue. We turned up to the side street where some of the cars were still heading and followed them up a narrow, dusty road. Horns sounded ahead of us and car radios blared out soul music. I heard bits of conversation from the people walking on either side of the car.

"These parties are among the best fringe benefits of living at 39 Upton Street," Mr. Milo Poong said. "Song, wine, food."

"You forgot the women," Benny said.

"I never have any particular success in that regard," Mr. Milo Poong said.

"Ha!" my grandmother said. "You can say that again."

"Well, you just leave the women to me," Benny said.

"Did we come here last year?" Harold said.

"You don't remember last year, Harold?" my grandmother said. She turned in her seat and looked back at us. When her eyes met mine she winked at me. "Huh, Harold?"

"No," Harold said slowly. "I remember Labor Day, but nothing this early in the summer."

"Maybe you don't remember being here," Benny said, "but you sure as hell ought to remember the ride home."

My grandmother started laughing, then began coughing. She coughed and laughed alternately.

Harold glanced at me, looking chagrined.

"He rode home in the *trunk*!" my grandmother said.

Harold knitted his brow, shook his head slowly.

"You remember!" Benny said. "Yes you do!"

"You put him in the trunk?" I said.

My grandmother tried to say something but she was laughing too hard.

"Damn straight, Pee Wee," Benny said. "He was slobbering all over and trying to kiss everybody. Shit, I had to do something, you know what I'm saying? So I put him in the trunk."

"That's really rather dangerous," Mr. Milo Poong said.

"What would have happened if we got into an accident, Lil?" Harold said.

"What would have happened?"

"Water under the bridge," my grandmother said. "That's all history.

Nothing happened, so everything's okay." She nodded at him and winked.

"Under the bridge. Right there!"

We had reached the parking lot of the VFW hall when she spotted a clearing next to the hall itself. Benny nosed the Cadillac into a parking space. My grandmother pulled her purse up onto her lap and opened it up. I thought she was going to pull out a compact or a mirror, but instead she produced a half pint bottle of gin and took a long swig. She handed the bottle to Benny and he took a long pull himself.

"All niggers out," my grandmother said.

I leaned forward, waiting for Benny to open the door and pull his seat forward. Harold Davenport put his hand on my arm. "Hey, kid."

"Yeah?"

"Keep an eye out for me, okay?" he said. "Make sure I don't -- you know, make sure they don't put me in the trunk again."

"Sure," I said, but I didn't know what I could do if Benny wanted to put him in the trunk. For a second the image was funny to me. Then I thought about being ganged up on by kids back home, being the odd kid out, the butt of jokes, and I felt sorry for Harold.

The VFW Hall was an ugly cement building with a metal signboard out front. *Cape Verdean American 4th of July Celebration* had been spelled out with magnetized letters. People congregated in the open doors of the hall, at the picnic tables under pavilions and next to their cars in the parking lot. The humidity seemed to trap conversation in the air, slow it down so that it was a muffled buzz. Laughter, shouts, mothers warning their children, all seemed to drone in the wet air, while overamplified music blared from inside the hall. I felt like I had had a sloe gin fizz, as though my head were stuffed with cotton. I wanted to stare at all the people, all the Cape Verdeans. There were some white people here and there, but no one seemed to be pointing at them, making

an issue out of them. No one seemed particularly interested in Mr. Milo Poong, even though he stood a good head above everyone else.

"Gotta get tickets," my grandmother said. "Need tickets to eat. Mr. Milo Poong, you get that munchoup out of the trunk and take it over to the food tent. Like last year."

"Certainly," Mr. Milo Poong said and enlisted Harold Davenport to help him.

I watched her move a few steps ahead of us toward the door to the hall. She wore polyester slacks and a green blouse wildly patterned with swirling shapes and dotted with large golden buttons. She had taken some time to do her hair that morning, but that was it --no makeup, no lipstick. Her deep golden brown skin didn't need any color. The only other concession she had made to fashion was her glasses; she had replaced her solid, black frame for a more stylish, faintly green pair that matched the color of her blouse and weren't held together with tape. The others were her "working glasses," she said.

"How about tickets to drink?" Benny said.

My grandmother moved ahead without answering him.

"Don't need no tickets for reefer, though, do we, Pee Wee?" Benny asked me. He held a cupped hand out to me and turned it over, showing me a crooked joint cradled in his palm. "This is the ticket!" he said.

My grandmother said, "you don't hurry your ass up here, I ain't buying nothing for you,"

She turned and slipped through the doors into the hall.

Benny's hand disappeared into his pants pocket and he climbed the steps to the front door of the hall. I followed close behind.

I felt strange that day at the Cape Verdean picnic – belonging and lost at the same time. Because while I felt this almost-giddy sensation of being home after a long journey, and of being at home with these people who were not only my color, but who looked like me, I also felt vaguely uneasy, guilty almost, because I wasn't doing anything. I should be helping out. It was all so different from my father's cookouts. Once a year he supervised the cooking for the Hawaiian Club's annual luau. He would set up several grills made from 55-gallon drums cut in half and mounted on cinderblocks to cook chicken and ribs, make the poi and the other side dishes and supply the condiments. His main responsibility, though, was the cooking of the kaluha pig, the main course and the center of attraction for the luau.

I was my father's "number one right hand man," which meant I ran all his errands. Starting last year I had not only fetched beer and cigarettes and checked with the various "Aunties" who were helping out to make sure that they had what they needed, I was also the official luau historian, filming the digging

of the pit and the placing of the stones and everything else for posterity. "So they can get it right after I'm dead," my father said.

My grandmother bought a handful of tickets and divided them between Benny, herself and me.

"Everyplace there is a sign," she told me, "tells you how many tickets you need to get what you want -- so many for munchoup, for linguica, for canj, for jag, gufong, chudice. Okay?"

"But you made some munchoup. Why do you have to pay for it?"

"To raise money for kids in school, scholarships."

I wanted to ask her what these different foods were, because so far I had only had manchoup, jag, canj and linguica. I knew from what my father had said about the food he had eaten in Asia when he was in the service My father said it was always a good idea to find out what the food was in front of you before you thought about eating it. He had learned that lesson the uncomfortable way in Asia when he was in the Air Force. But before I could say anything else a large man dressed in an old Army uniform approached us with his arms held wide.

"Oh, my God, if it isn't Lillian Santos in the flesh!"

"Ai, who's that -- Billy Monteiro?"

"The one and only!"

The man wrapped my grandmother in his arms, laughing, and gave her a rocking hug. The old, faded uniform stretched tight across his back. The man held a cigar in one hand, and, as he hugged my grandmother, the noxious lit end wagged in front of my nose.

"Hey, I'm an old lady; you want to crack my ribs?" my grandmother said.

Benny leaned over and whispered in my ear. "You better make your escape now, Pee Wee, or you'll be listening to this old-timey shit for days."

I turned to Benny, but he was already ten feet away, headed for the bar in the back of the club.

"Rory!" my grandmother shouted.

I faced her. Billy Monteiro was standing there next to her, his arm around her waist. The cigar was now planted in one corner of his mouth. He had a fat, jowly face, long and bulbous in the chin and mouth, with a long nose, too. A dozen tarnished medals hung from over the left breast pocket. His jacket was just barely held together by its buttons. I expected with his every movement to be bombarded with buttons exploding from his chest.

"This is my sweetheart here," he said.

"You remember Billy Monteiro?" my grandmother asked me. I didn't want to be rude, but I had to shake my head. "Billy, this is my grandson, Rory. You remember him. Laura's son."

"Ai yai! This is the little pipsqueak you used to bring down in the summer? He's a big boy now. Put it here, Ronny," he said and completely enveloped my hand in his.

His fingers were as fat as cooked sausage about to burst their casings. He smushed my fingers and pumped my hand. Leaning forward as far as his stomach would allow, he spoke to me around the cigar.

"You don't remember me, do you? Me and your grandfather used to have a boat together back in the old days. You know, you could have been my grandson, if your grandmother hadn't run off with that rascal Johnny Santos." He straightened himself and plucked the cigar from his mouth. "But he's gone now and we're still here and it's never too late, huh? Huh, Lil?"

"In a pig's eye," my grandmother said and Billy tilted his head back and guffawed.

"Pig's eye!" he said and barked more laughter. The cigar went back in his mouth and he looked over at my grandmother. "That's what I like about you, Lil, all sass and no beating around the bush."

She said something to him in Creole and he laughed again, this time so hard he started to get tears in his eyes.

She pointed at me. "He's from California," she said. "Visiting from California."

"California! I was in California after the war. The beaches, Hollywood! Yes, sir, that was the place for me."

When someone learned that I lived in California it was inevitable for them to evoke the usual images of palm trees, movie stars and Disneyland. The California that most people knew would fit inside of Connecticut. My California was fields and canals and tumbleweed and nightmare bombers rehearsing for World War III, taking off day and night.

"So how you like being home?" Billy asked. "Good to be back home with all the creoles? Bet you don't have no creoles out in California."

"It's okay, I guess," I said, although I had no sense of Onset being home.

"Your mother here?" Billy asked. "I haven't seen her in ages."

Before I could think of anything to say, my grandmother answered for me. "She ain't here," she said. "Couldn't make it." I turned to my grandmother. What did that mean?

"That's a shame," Billy said. "Haven't seen her in a long time. Beautiful girl. All the guys were crazy about Laura."

"Lot of good it did her," my grandmother said.

The band returned from their break. There were six of them, all men in their fifties or sixties, dressed in loud-colored, loose shirts -- two guitar players, a bass player, a saxophonist, percussionist and accordion player. One of the guitar players stepped up to the microphone.

"Okay, we're back now and we're going to start out slow since we're all old men and I see some of you old running partners of mine out there who need to ease their bones out on the dance floor. This is a song you all know from the days of the oldtimers."

The band started playing a slow, Latin tune, the percussionist setting the rhythm with a pair of maracas and both guitars scratching and plinking out a halting cadence. The accordion and sax and bass joined in.

"Come on, Lil, let's take a little spin," Billy said.

"I hope you finally learned how to dance," my grandmother answered.

He barked a laugh and scooted her toward the dance floor. In a few seconds dozens of couples were out on the floor, clutching each other and looking serious as they did a shuffling quasi-foxtrot. You would think it was some kind of funeral dance the way the men and women looked as they moved across the floor, faces turned away from each other and eyes focused somewhere above the other dancers' heads. The leader of the band began to sing. It sounded like a love song, but since it was all in creole, I couldn't really tell. I found myself moving to the music, though. It was an easy rhythm to pick up.

"Come on, sweetheart, dance with me!"

I looked over my shoulder to see who was talking and saw a middle-aged woman almost as large as Billy Monteiro coming toward me. She took my

hand and led me to the dance floor. We had had two dances the previous year in the eighth grade and though I had gone to both of them, I had only danced a few times. In the dimly lighted gym, the boys stood on one side, the girls the other, and it was entirely up to us to cross the floor and ask someone to dance. The girls didn't budge. As the woman towed me in her perfumed wake, I thought how much easier it would be if the girls at home would take some of the initiative.

I liked to dance; it was my one true connection with my mother, I felt, the thing she had left me, but at the school dances, it was just too much to overcome the inertia and the self-consciousness to keep crossing that floor; too much to gamble to stay on the dance floor after one song with a girl and to ask her to dance again and again. And then there was the whole "rhythm" thing. The white kids, the boys especially, could not really dance that well. In fact, most of them only ventured across the floor when the dj put a slow song on the turntable. The black kids could dance, so what did it mean that I liked to dance and, furthermore, could dance? I had to dance, but I couldn't dance too well. The best dances were the ones they did on Soul Train, but those were Black dances, dances the Black kids did. I couldn't dance those dances and not be labelled.

"I don't know how to dance like this," I confessed to the woman.

She had led me to the middle of the dance floor. I felt embarrassed, certain that every eye was on me. She placed my left hand at her side and took my right hand in her left and held it up near my shoulder. "You just follow me, then, sweetheart," she said. "It's not hard."

She led and I followed. I soon got the hang of the simple step and we moved our way through the dancing couples. "There you go," she said. "That's the way." She hummed along to the music.

As we danced I faced two tremendous breasts, the largest I probably had ever seen, certainly the biggest I had ever come so close to. They were just inches away, gently jiggling before me as we shuffled to the beat, and I was mortified. I wanted to stare, but knew I shouldn't; wanted to touch them, but knew that was out of the question.

"Can you understand the song?" she asked.

"No. I don't know Portuguese," I said.

"Your mother never taught you?"

"No. My mother left when I was little."

"Ai, coitad," she said. She pulled me to her and squeezed, pressing my face against her breasts, her skin against my skin, my cheek against the wonderful twin swellings. I gulped air. "This is a sad love song, a *morna*," she said. "Do you want me to tell it to you?"

"Sure," I said.

She turned me in a half circle and relaxed her grip on me. Seconds later she had pulled me tight again.

"My love, you are so cruel. You are like a cup of water in the drought, a taste, no more, and then the thirst returns. You promised to love me forever, but now you have a new love. My love, you are so cruel. You are like the east wind that sends boats to America, but parches those who stay behind. My love, you are so cruel. To live like this, to hear your laughter, taste your perfume in the air, is to be in torment. Oh, why did I love someone as cruel as you?"

With each refrain she led me in ever tightening circles, until, when the song ended, we were standing in one place, rocking from side to side. The last notes of the saxophone echoed through the hall and the woman gave me one last squeeze. When she finally released me she held me at arm's length and shook her head.

"Be careful of love," she said. "Love is cruel."

"All the time?" I said.

But she just sighed and walked away.

I found Harold Davenport at a crowded picnic table in one of the covered pavilions. He had a steaming bowl of muncoup in front of him and a pile of buttered bread beside it. He looked up only briefly as I sat down across from him. "Not as good as your grandmother's," he said.

"Not as good as my mother's," the woman sitting to his left said, and smiled at me.

The man to Harold's right said "My mother made this batch, and I think it's better than anybody else can make." He looked at me, but he didn't smile.

"Don't you get tired of eating the same thing?" I asked Harold.

Although my grandmother would occasionally make meatloaf or fry some chicken or pork chops, it seemed that munchoup was the main thing she cooked.

"Kid, when you've been in the Army during war and eaten C-rations for months on end, you will gladly eat food, real food, endlessly," the man said.

"Don't you like munchoup?"

"It's okay. I like Chinese food. My father owns a Chinese restaurant. We eat different stuff there all the time."

"So you're spoiled, huh?" He slurped some munchoup for a while. "What kind of C.V. are you if you don't love munchoup?"

"C.V.?"

"Cape Verdean. Every Cape Verdean I ever knew would rather eat munchoup than do just about anything else."

"Heck," the man to Harold's right said, "munchoup is what kept Cape Verdeans alive. If it wasn't for munchoup, you wouldn't be here, kid."

"That's right," the woman said. "It was either munchoup or cranberries when the oldtimers first got here."

"Shoot, munchoup is all the food you need," the man went on. "You got your meat, your vegetables, your starch. Add some bread in there, what else you need?"

"Fruits," I said.

"That's where the cranberries came in," the woman said, and she and the man and Harold laughed.

My stomach gurgled with hunger. I reached in my pocket and fingered the food tickets my grandmother had given me. I turned around to look at the line of people at the food pavilion next to us.

"Who are your people, kid?" the man said. "You look familiar, but I don't know you."

The question stumped me for a second. I had never been asked about "my people" before. A long second passed before my grandmother's last name bubbled to the surface.

"Santos," I said. "My grandmother's name is Lillian. Lillian Santos. I'm staying with her in Boston for a while."

"Your grandfather was Johnny Santos?" he said.

"I guess."

"Ai, Nha Mai!" He turned to an older man on his other side and spoke to him in Creole.

The old man looked up from his food. His face was remarkably smooth, but his eyes were yellow and wet, and his droopy mustache and the thinning hairs on his head were completely white. The old man turned to me and beckoned with a thin, papery-skinned hand.

"Go on," the first man said. "He wants to tell you something."

I went around the table to the other side. The old man turned on his seat and held out both hands to me. I shook his right hand and he clasped his left hand over mine. He spoke to me in Creole in a throaty voice.

"He says your grandfather, Johnny Santos, was the toughest sonofabitch he ever knew. He could outdrink, outfight, outfish and outlove any three men. He says that if you grow up to be half the man your grandfather was, you'll still be more man than almost anybody else you know."

I had never heard someone be so proud about things like fighting and drinking. My father discouraged both. Was this what people here expected me to be like when I grew up? My grandfather must have been like Benny.

The old man patted my hand in his rough paw and nodded and kept patting my hand while he turned and talked to the other man. Finally, he relaxed his grip and I pulled my hand away. I stood there a second, waiting for someone to speak to me again, but he didn't say anything else. Harold had

returned to his munchoup, the woman had gotten up and left, and the two men were now quietly talking to each other in Creole.

Harold was right. The munchoup they were serving wasn't anywhere nearly as good as my grandmother's. My father would be disappointed that I couldn't say exactly why it was inferior -- he could always tell in a few tastes why a particular dish wasn't satisfactory, which spice was lacking, which flavor was too strong. I ate two bowls, though, and had some linguica and some jag, which wasn't as good as my grandmother's either. For dessert I decided to try the *gufong*, which was fried batter flavored with strawberries. I was returning from the *gufong* table when I heard Benny's voice rising from a group of men sitting in lawn chairs near the woods that ran around the edge of the VFW complex. Cradling the still-hot *gufong*, just out of the deep fat fryer, I walked over to the men.

"Are you a *niggah*?" Benny said, accentuating the word. "Are you ? You may be a *niggah*, but I'm not a *niggah*. I know Johnny Santos wasn't no *niggah*. I know Joey Lombard's grandfather wasn't no *niggah*. Who else here is a *niggah*?"

Men of all ages were sitting around in the lawn chairs or on the end of an old picnic table. Others stood. Several of them were older men like Billy Monteiro, dressed in their uniforms and most of them were holding cups of

beer or mixed drinks. No one raised their hand or nodded their head. Benny was standing beside the picnic table as he spoke. He was holding a beer, too, but I could tell by the glassy look in his eyes that he had probably smoked a joint with someone.

A young guy about his age, with dark skin and a bushy Afro, pointed at Benny. "Hey, ain't nobody wants to be a niggah, but one thing's for sure, when you're dark and you ain't got good hair, that's sure enough what the blancs want to call you."

"What the hell you think they're gonna call you when you wear your hair like that?" one of the older men said. "You sure look like a coon with all that wild hair shit all over the place."

The dark young man scowled at him. He started to say something but had to wait for the laughter to die down. "This is the fashion," he said. "Like I said, I ain't got good hair like some of youse, so I have to do what I think looks best."

"That's part of the problem right there," another man said. He was about my father's age, a small man with a very faint mustache, so light-skinned he could have been white. "Everybody wants to be fashionable, to be American. Heck, a lot of what American is, is just buying all that shit they advertise on t.v. This week it's an Afro, next week it'll be a bone in your nose."

Laughter again. Benny drained his beer and swung his head around. He saw me and motioned me over.

"Look at me," a friend of the Afro-wearer said. "I ain't no *yambab* like Lolo Almeida there—" he pointed to the man who had just spoken -- "but my hair is good and I ain't all that dark. But white people as soon as they see that you ain't white, ain't Puerto Rican, ain't Chinese or something, and they don't know what the hell you are, shit -- they figure you got to be some kind of niggah. I was going with this girl up in Boston, white girl, and she took me home to meet her family."

At that, several of the men made clucking sounds or low whistles. "Guess who's coming to dinner!" somebody said.

"Took me to dinner," the man continued. "And they would have stood on their head naked on the Boston Common to find out what I was. I knew that if I said Cape Verdean right out, they'd say "Cape What?" Where's that? And when I said off the coast of Africa, that'd be it. So I say, Portuguese. And then they say, Portuguese? Then they let it alone for a while, but they come back later. The Azores? Nope. The Madeiras? Nope. Brazil? Nope."

Benny handed me his cup. "Go get me another beer," he said. "Over there." He pointed to one of the pavilions.

"You say, Brazil," one of the older men said, "and you're all right, see? Brazil's all right because white people know about the Girl from Impanema and all that. That kind of brown is okay, because they don't try to figure out where

the brown comes from! Where do they think the brown comes from in Brazilians?"

"You should have said you were from Impanema," Lolo Almeida said, and everybody, including the guy who was telling the story, laughed.

"It's almost like they want you to lie," he said, "because once you tell them the truth they change on you, like you suddenly turned into a vampire or something."

One of the men who had been silent all this time spoke up. He was about my color, golden brown, and was also dressed in an old uniform. "Hell, all the ways the blancs have about figuring out color, Cape Verdeans got them, too. We talk about *yambabs*, *creoles*, *prettis*, *badious*. What's all that mean? Everybody here knows somebody light, who maybe has dark people in his family. What does someone like that do? He goes off and disappears."

Benny looked down and saw that I was still standing beside him.

"Go on," he said. "I'm thirsty. What you just standing there for?"

"I'm just listening," I said. It felt like I was doing more than listening, though. The men's words were getting inside me and running up and down my body. A week ago I thought I knew who I was; now I was bewildered by what Benny had told me, by what he and the others were saying now. What were we? How were we supposed to act?

"Ain't nothing nobody ain't said before or won't say again. Now go on."

I went to the beer table. I didn't expect that they would give me beer for Benny, but the people behind the counter seemed to be drunk themselves and didn't much care. I was tempted to take a sip, but there were just too many people around and too many eyes on me. I turned away from the beer table and sure enough someone was staring at me, a man about my father's age, from a few tables away, making sure I didn't drink any of the beer, I supposed. He looked familiar, but he didn't give any indication that he knew me. Everybody was looking familiar to me today. It was seeing all those people like me, like my grandmother and like Benny. It seemed everybody was related.

When I got back to the men, the discussion was more heated. I pulled Benny's sleeve and he reached back and took the beer from me without even looking.

"We're different from Blacks anyway you want to look at it, except in color," Lolo Almeida said. He stood up and as he spoke he ticked off examples on his fingers. "One: none of us here, not a single Cape Verdean, came to this country as a slave, and neither did any of our ancestors. My father, your grandmother, your grandfather, everybody came here because they wanted to. Two: we came with our own language, and we still have it. Three: we got our own music, ain't nobody took that away from us!"

He paused for a second and nodded toward the VFW hall. We could hear the music blaring away. One of the younger guys said, "You have to remind us about that old time geetchie shit?"

"Hey, that's your heritage!" one of the older men said. "Which is more than I can say for wearing your hair like you just came out of the jungle or something!"

Hoots and hollers. The young man with the Afro shook his head. Two of the men in uniform had gotten up and were dancing with each other playfully.

Lolo said loudly, "Four: we came with our Catholic religion, and we kept that. Five: we know where we came from and still got family on the islands we can write to and visit. Six: we're still coming over every week, every week! Cumad," he said, turning to one of the dancing men, "you got someone coming over next month, don't you, fresh from the old country?"

"That's right, my father's niece's boy."

"Seven: we know our families back as far as any white people. Eight: we got our own food that we brought with us."

The rest of the oldtimers cheered him when he had finished and looked at the Afro-wearing young man and his friends. "Sooner or later, though, it all goes back to Africa," one of them answered. "Don't it? Cape Verdeans just didn't pop up out of the sea, did they? They had to come from somewhere."

"So did everybody else," Lolo said. "Cubans, Puerto Ricans, where'd they come from? You take some African, some Spanish, maybe some Indian, you mix them up together and you get Cape Verdean, Cuban, Puerto Rican. Hell, what's an Englishman? They got Anglo-Saxon, Norman, Viking. Italians got African in them. Hannibal crossed the Alps and the color line! Spanish got African in 'em, the French, too."

"Ain't nobody calling no Frenchman nigger," one of the young men said.

"So what are you saying?" Benny asked. "Some white kid calls you nigger and you're going to join the Black Panthers or something? Somebody says you're a jigaboo and so you have to get into this Black Power shit? What the fuck kind of sense that make?"

"There's safety in numbers," the second young man said.

"And a bigger target, too," someone said.

"You know what they used to call Onset back when Cape Verdeans first moved here?" one of the old men said. "First off, this was the only place they let us live, down here in the marshy area. You notice how there aren't any Portagees living on the hills up on the harbor or in Wareham, huh? Anyway, they used to call this Jungletown and Niggertown. They quit that pretty fast when Johnny got hold of them."

"Johnny Santos, his grandfather," Lolo said, pointing to Benny, "once heard about these two white guys coming down here looking for Cape Verdean girls,

calling us niggers and all that. He caught up with those boys down at the Blue Flame and beat the shit out of them. 'You see a nigger,' he said, 'you tell him Johnny Santos kicked your ass.' So they apologize and say 'colored,' and he whipped them some more. They weren't only beat up, but confused. 'Portuguese,' he said. 'But you can call me Mr. Santos.' It didn't take long for that kind of shit to stop."

The music stopped and the men in uniform quit dancing to the applause of the others around them. One of the men cupped his hand to his ear and listened to something.

"You hear that?" he said. Everybody turned in the direction he was leaning. I inclined my head to hear, but heard nothing but the laughter and conversation of people and the sound of cars in the parking lot crunching gravel under their tires. "That sound like a gas turbine?" the man continued. "Whir, whir, whir?"

The men's faces were blank.

"That's Johnny and all the other oldtimers turning in their graves at all this Black talk," the man said.

"But we all have black blood," one of the younger men said. "You admit that, right? Cape Verdeans just didn't spontaneously generate. We came from somewhere, and that somewhere is Africa. I mean, we're more African than we are Portuguese."

"Some of us are, some of us aren't. That's part of what makes us who we are," someone answered.

"No one is denying that," Lolo said. "I mean, look at us. These aren't sun tans. All we're saying is that you have your own people right here; you don't have to go joining or looking for anything else. We're different from the Blacks and we like how we are. We want to preserve that and we want you kids to preserve that, too. When these people wear dashikis and try to learn Swahili, that has nothing to do with you. A Cape Verdean doing that is like if someone whose family was from England started wearing Bulgarian clothes and learning to speak whatever the hell it is they speak in Bulgaria."

"Let me ask you this, then," the first young guy said. "I always hear my pop talking about World War II and what he did. He was in a black unit. How about that?"

"That was then and that was war," one of the men in uniform said. "The Army was segregated back then. Wasn't until 1948 that Truman ordered it desegregated. Well, you know how white people are when it comes to somebody who is not white – they want to figure you out, put you in a category. So they got black outfits, Japanese and Chinese outfits, Indian outfits, Mexican outfits. You had to fit in somewhere. I got drafted and they looked at my birth certificate and it said *Portuguese*. 'Portuguese?' this sergeant said, 'Portuguese is white and you sure as hell ain't white.' I said I didn't want to be in a white

outfit, because everybody in the outfit could see right off I wasn't white and I didn't want any trouble. But the sergeant said they couldn't put me in the Black unit because of what my birth certificate said. Asked me if I had changed it, and I said why in the hell would I do that and now want to get into the Black unit? So for a while I didn't have no unit, I just was assigned to the sergeant as his errand runner. Finally this colonel came along and I explained things to him and he agreed that it would be tough on me in a white unit and that if it was okay with me I could be assigned to one of the Black units."

"Some of the *yambabs* got into white outfits, though," his dancing partner said. "They got in and they stayed there because it was the easiest thing to do. Charlie Amado, Junior Lopes, Louie Perreira, they all went that way and that was the easiest way for them to go."

"So it's okay to be white, when you aren't, but not okay to be Black, when you mostly are," the second young guy said.

"Some of us got more white than Black, some are mostly white. What you think a *yambab* is?"

"Yeah," one of the men in uniform said. He held up his cup and pointed with it as he spoke, swaying on his feet. "Don't south they got this shit -- what they call it? Something like the one -- " He snapped his fingers several times -- "one, one drop law. You got one drop of Black, you Black. What kind of shit is that? You be who you are, I be who I am, Lolo who he is: Cape Verdean."

Benny finished his beer and let the cup fall from his hand. "Let me ask you this," he said to the guy with the Afro. "Pretend you're going to be born tomorrow all over again, right? You're going to be born tomorrow. And God comes to you and says, "You have the choice to be born white or Black. What do you want to be?" Knowing what you know about how things are here, about how it is for white people and how it is for black people, what would you choose to be?"

"Man," said the guy Benny had been baiting the most, the spokesmen for the young men with the Afros. "That's a stupid question. It's just not a real question. You can't be born again. You got to deal with what you have here and now."

Benny laughed. "You know what you would say," he said. "You just don't want to admit it."

"Man," one of the older guys said, "if everybody was going to start over again and you could decide, wouldn't be a black person in America!"

"If you're white, you're all right," Lolo said. "If you're brown, stick around. But if you're black -- stay back!"

The group of men began to break up and Benny wandered off with a guy his age who showed up and beckoned to him from a few feet away. I went in search of kids my age. I felt dizzy from all I had heard. I didn't want to think

about all that confusing stuff. It was much easier to just think of myself as Frank Chen's son and pretend that I was a funny-looking Chinese kid and not have to worry about all these other things.

I found a bunch of kids playing football behind the VFW hall in a field between two small softball diamonds. I didn't like football as much as I liked baseball, but I wanted to play. The game seemed to have been underway for a while, though, and they weren't letting any new players in. Several other kids were standing near the sidelines, anxiously waiting their turn, but the kids running and grunting and tackling on the field didn't pay us any attention. I watched for a few downs, then wandered back to the hall.

The day went on like that -- food and conversation and dancing. Whenever my grandmother would catch up to me there were more people she wanted to introduce me to. Soon it seemed that every time I would walk by a group of people, I would be pointed out as Lil Santos' grandson. Occasionally, someone would mention my mother's name. I wanted to ask them if they had seen her, or knew about her, but I was always too shy. I was glad when it finally started to get dark and the festivities moved to uptown Onset, where the fireworks were held. Billy Monteiro invited us to watch them from his boat out in the harbor, but my grandmother said he had been drinking too much and she didn't want to get dumped into the water out in the dark, so we drove uptown

with the thousands of others, white and Cape Verdean, and we sat on the hood of my grandmother's car and watched the sky explode. In the dark I felt anonymous and safe.

Harold made a running commentary on the types of fireworks being used, partly to show us how much he knew, but mostly, I think, to prove he wasn't drunk. On the ride home he rode back in the car with the rest of us. We drove back down through the Cape Verdean part of town rather than taking the shortcut out to the Cranberry Highway. I was already dozing in the back, sitting between Harold and Mr. Milo Poong. As we came down the hill from uptown, I noticed a parking lot full of cars off to the right and a yellow building with people lined up outside it waiting to get in. "Hot damn!" my grandmother said. "Big time tonight!" The building had a large blue neon sign over its entrance. The name of the place was The Blue Flame. I turned and looked at the club through the back window as we drove on and kept looking until the sign became a faint blue dot, then disappeared.

"That was The Blue Flame," I said quietly, but no one answered me. My grandmother started talking to Benny about something that needed to be done to the house and Harold and Mr. Milo Poong talked over my head about paintings and books. I sat between them and listened to their droning voices until I fell asleep, leaning against Harold.

When we got home I dragged myself up the front steps and fumbled along behind my grandmother to my room. I knew my way around in the dark by then, so I didn't bother with turning the lights on. Halfway to my bed I saw that someone was sitting in the dark near the fireplace, smoking a cigarette. For a moment I was scared, but then I realized that it was probably Spider or one of the other boarders. My grandmother would be mad that they had come into her part of the house without her being there, but I knew I could just let them out my side door into the hallway and she wouldn't know any better.

The lamp near the chair flicked on and I shielded my eyes. It wasn't one of the boarders sitting there, but a woman.

"Hello, baby," she said.

She looked the same as she did in her pictures, pretty, thin, but her dark hair was short and pulled back from her face. She was wearing a subdued pink skirt and jacket and a billowy white blouse, nothing like the costumes she wore in the pictures when she was dancing. Her eyes looked dreamy, far away. She blew smoke up at the ceiling and hummed something and then slowly lowered her head and looked me up and down.

"You're just about as skinny as the pictures make you look," she said.

"Doesn't he feed you at that restaurant of his?"

There was something in the way she said it that made me feel a quick little surge of anger, but almost immediately I felt ashamed of being angry with her.

My mother, my mother.

"Yes," I said. "I eat there all the time."

"You like Chinese food?" she said.

"Yeah, I guess."

"He ever fix you Portuguese food?"

"No."

"That Chinese food doesn't stick to you. You ever seen any fat Chinese? They're all skinny, skinny, skinny." She took another drag from her cigarette and looked at the long ash formed on its tip. She pointed to the table over by the door to my grandmother's room. There was an ashtray on top of it.

"Bring me that ashtray, baby."

I picked up the ashtray and saw my grandmother standing in the doorway to the kitchen, looking through her darkened bedroom at my mother sitting there in the chair. She didn't say anything to me, didn't come forward into the living room and the light, didn't go back into the kitchen.

"You find it?" my mother asked.

I took her the ashtray. She reached out and grabbed my hand that held the ashtray and gently brought the cigarette toward it to flick off the ashes. A half inch of ash fell to the floor. "Oh, well," she said. She continued holding my

hand. Her fingers were cool. She smiled crookedly. "Why don't you give your mother a kiss?"

I hesitated and she squeezed my hand.

"What's the matter?" she said. She looked at me with droopy eyes. "What she been telling you about me?"

I leaned forward to kiss her on the cheek, but she turned her face and kissed me on the lips. She tasted smoky.

"I ain't told him nothing about you," said my grandmother, standing now just inside the living room. My mother pulled the ashtray from my hand and sat back in her chair.

"Nothing at all? Not even the good things?"

"I told you about sneaking around here at night like this," my grandmother said. "Especially when I'm not here."

"I have a key," my mother said. She drew on her cigarette and breathed the smoke out of her nose. She turned to me and smiled again. "He's handsome, isn't he?"

"He's a good-looking boy," my grandmother said. "But that don't change nothing about you coming in at night like this without my permission. That key's for emergencies."

"Maybe it is an emergency," my mother said.

My grandmother flicked on the big ceiling light and walked across the floor to within a few feet from my mother's chair. My mother turned her face aside and held her hand up against the light. She put the ashtray down on the arm of the chair.

"You trying to blind me?" she said.

The bright light aged her ten years. Her face was thin, the skin drawn tight over her cheekbones and around her eyes so that the bone stood out against her eye sockets. Her cheeks were sunken and the tendons in her neck looked as taut as barbed wire. It was a ruined face, a ruined beautiful face.

My grandmother snorted.

"Don't throw nothing at me," she said. "Trying to *blind* you. Shit, you're trying to kill yourself. What's blinding compared to that?"

My mother laughed and looked over at me, slowly lowering her hand from her face.

"Look who's talking," she said. She turned to me. "How much gin she drinking these days? Is she up to a quart yet?"

I didn't know what a quart of gin was, exactly. I saw the glasses my grandmother drank each day, but I hadn't kept track.

"I take care of my business every day," my grandmother said. "I don't have nobody taking care of me, nobody I need to depend on."

"Are you talking about me?" my mother said. She stubbed out her cigarette in the ashtray and her hands were clumsy searching for something. She reached over and pulled a tiny handbag from under the chair and fished out a pack of cigarettes. "Shit." She crumpled up the pack and let it fall to the floor. "Ma, you got a cigarette?" She looked over at me. "Get your mother a cigarette from Nana. Go on."

My grandmother pulled a pack of cigarettes from the pocket of her robe. She tapped one out for herself and handed me the pack when I walked over. "You don't smoke menthol," she said to my mother.

"Sometimes you have to make do," my mother said. "Thank you, sweetheart."

My mother made a face as she took a drag off the menthol cigarette. "This is all the coloreds smoke," she said, shaking her head. "All we stock in the club is Kools, Salems, Bel Airs."

"I ain't got time to stand around in the middle of the night talking about cigarettes," my grandmother said. "What do you want? Why'd you come here? Did he kick you out?"

"You won't even say his name, will you? Like it's something bad in your mouth. Why do you hate him so much?"

"I ain't got time for this foolishness. You make up your mind you're going to talk to me, you can come back at some decent hour and we'll talk. You just

leave us alone now." My grandmother turned and headed back to her bedroom.

"Hey," my mother said and stood. "Okay, all right --" She tottered unsteadily and took a half step to the side, knocking the ashtray off the chair arm. Her right hand swung up beside her and waved as she lost her balance completely and fell backwards, half onto the chair, half against the lamp beside it. The lamp went down and the bulb popped and then she fell over backward onto the floor and lay there, her hand with the cigarette folded over onto her chest.

I hurried over to her and took the cigarette from her hand.

"Shit," my grandmother said. "Get Benny."

I crawled over my mother and found the ashtray and put the cigarette out. My grandmother was grunting and cursing as she tried to pull her away from the chair and the lamp and out into the center of the floor.

I ran up the stairs and stood outside Benny's door, listening. There was soft music playing and I could hear Benny humming to the song. I knocked.

"What the hell is it?"

"Nana needs you in the living room," I said.

"What you still doing up?" The door jerked open and he stood there barechested, wearing just a pair of jeans. His room was thick with pot smoke.

He clenched the stub of a joint in his teeth and held an ashtray. "What the hell she want now?"

"My mother," I said. "She fell down. Nana wants you to help."

Benny took a long hit off the joint and glared at me. His eyes were dead and glassy in the dim light from the bulb hanging in the hallway behind me.

"She said for you to come now."

He snorted, then coughed out some smoke and hit the joint again, sucking on it noisily, until it burned down to his fingers. Dropping the roach into the ashtray, he went back across the room, put the ashtray on one of the large speakers behind his bed and stood there, facing the wall. The music playing was all crazy saxophones and drums.

"Benny."

"I heard you, dammit. What the fuck, am I deaf or something?"

"Are you coming?"

"I'm coming," he said.

Downstairs my grandmother stood over my mother, her arms folded across her chest. "Help me get her to the empty room on your floor," she said.

"What the hell's wrong with her? She using again?"

"She's just tired," my grandmother said. "Come on, help me get her up."

She went to my mother's head and bent over.

"Just stay out of the way," Benny said. He bent down, roughly grabbed my mother and sat her up, then grunted and stood with her in his arms. Her head lolled backward and it looked for a second like her eyes had popped open. "She doesn't weigh anything anymore. You ought to just call him to come get her."

"Too late for all that foolishness," my grandmother said.

I followed them up the stairs to the second floor. My grandmother moved ahead of Benny and unlocked the door across the landing from his and turned on the light. There was a low, metal-framed bed in the room with a lumpy mattress on it. My grandmother moved aside and Benny tossed my mother onto it.

"Be careful with her," I said.

Benny ignored me. He stood looking down at her while my grandmother loosened her blouse and took off her shoes and pulled a blanket over her.

"Stupid bitch," he said.

I was standing in the doorway when he turned around. "Don't talk about her like that," I said. "She's my mother." Benny pushed me aside and went out into the hall.

"Big fucking deal, Pee Wee," he said. "She's my mother, too."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

"Hey, little man, how's it going?" Spider said.

He and Charlie Brown were standing on the sidewalk and looking up at me where I sat on the top of the front stoop. Charlie Brown smiled and waved at me, though he was only ten feet away.

It was early evening of the next day and I had just gotten up. I felt inside out and backward, groggy from sleep and the day almost gone, the familiar late day shadows filling the stairs with shade. It was Friday and the steady undertone of Tremont Avenue traffic sounded like a far off wind. I had been counting cars turning off Tremont and coming down Upton Street. Everyone seemed in a hurry. Everyone except my mother. She still hadn't gotten up. My grandmother told me not to expect to see her until the sun went down. My mother's world was the opposite of mine, she said. Daytime was a strange time for her. "Like a bat," my grandmother said.

"Where you been hidin', little man?" Spider asked.

He climbed the steps and stopped even with me. Charlie Brown straggled a few paces behind. They looked like they were wearing the same clothes they had on at the airport, overdressed for the heat, with their long coats and sweaters. Spider's hat looked like it had been kicked around on a wet street for half a day. I must have been staring at it because he tried to look up at it

himself, then took it off and tried to reform it with careful tweaks and strokes.

"This fellow over near Pine Street and I had a tussle," he said carefully. "Over some trifling business concerning disputed property."

"Yeah, bottle of wine," Charlie Brown chimed in merrily.

"Indeed," Spider said. "In any case, I was getting the best of him when he knocked off my hat and stomped on it. Distracted me." He popped the hat back on his head.

"You look like somebody, like somebody kicked your puppy," Charlie Brown said. He eased himself up the stairs and stood even with Spider.

"What's wrong?"

I was in a cross current of wino stink. I wanted them to go away.

"I don't know," I said. "Nothing."

"Ah!" Spider said, "the great fallback. When in doubt, nothing works like 'I don't know.' There's many a time I've gotten out of trouble that way."

"Yeah, especially with the police," Charlie Brown said.

Spider stood looking down at me for a few seconds, then tipped his hat to me. "Well, dinner is about to be served," he said, "and Lil's table waits for no man. We'll see you inside."

He quickly mounted the stairs. Charlie Brown lagged behind, looking like he wanted to say something to me, but he just smiled his loose, wet-lipped smile and then hurried after his partner.

I counted more cars. I listened to the Chinese kids playing at the end of the street. Sirens announced catastrophe and mayhem on Tremont. A hippie walked by and gave me the peace sign.

I wanted to go somewhere, to run and keep running, but I didn't move. I rested my head on my knees and fidgeted, mumbled a song to myself and jostled my face with my legs. Back home, if I was alone like this in a mood like this, I would sing a nonsense song, do a nonsense dance, to get rid of the strangeness, to tire myself out, but I couldn't do that here, not here on the street, not in the room where I slept. There was no place to be alone. Except for the roof.

I lifted my head from my knees, turned and looked up at the house. Just looking at the corner of the roof, at its height, reassured me of the privacy up there. I would be alone with the pigeons.

I stood inside the main hallway at the foot of the stairs leading up, out of view of the kitchen. I could hear the boarders eating dinner. I cocked my head and listened up the stairs. Nothing. I made my way up.

The first thing I did was walk around the edges, patrolling the borders, looking down at the stoop and what I could see of the street through the trees, peering over at the backyard and the blue rectangle of my grandmother's Cadillac parked in the tiny fenced-in area. The roofs of the adjoining buildings stretched down the block in either direction. I knew that Benny stepped over

onto the other roofs whenever he felt like it. The roof to the west had a hammock strung between pipes and covered with a canopy that he liked to lie in. I thought for sure that the owner of the hammock would come up and find him there and that there would then be trouble, but no one ever did. That roof also had a portable barbeque grill and a homemade sundial. The roof to the east was bare like ours.

The sky was dark in the west. I could see fat clouds creeping toward the city and felt the breeze picking up. A tune came to my mind. It made no sense, had no melody, just the beat of drums, the rhythm of something. I hummed and began to move to it. I swung around in tight circles, my arms held up and wide, then turned and moved the other way. My hands moved over my head like I was climbing, or swimming, or warding something off. The gravel on the rooftop scrunched beneath my feet and the sounds of the city were occasional punctuations to my song. I started groaning, making sounds to accompany the music, my dancing. Words I didn't understand. I marched right and left, slid my feet to the beat, held my hands up high, then brought them scissoring down, cutting, cutting, cutting. I hopped from foot to foot, pranced, made like a stalking lion, then spun around again, a bird, a vulture.

I turned and faced my mother. She stood beside the door. One of my grandmother's housecoats hung loosely from her shoulders. She kept the housecoat closed with one hand and held a cigarette in the other.

"You used to dance like mad when you were a baby," she said. "We would take you places and if there was music you would stop, didn't matter where it was, stop and start dancing. People would stop and watch you and start clapping."

My face and neck felt hot. I was out here in the open, caught. My hands hanging at my side were suddenly these unnecessary, embarrassing things. I tried to slip them into my pockets, but my jeans were tight, so I stuck my fingertips in.

"I don't remember that," I said. "I don't remember you."

"That's why I have to remember it all for the both of us." She walked over the edge of the roof and looked down at the backyard. "That's the ugliest Cadillac I've ever seen. You know, she got someone to paint it for her. With a brush. You can see all the lines if you get up close. Coitad." She turned back to me. "You know what that means, 'coitad'?"

"No."

"It's Creole," she said. "Poor thing.' I forgot you don't know any Creole."

"Is it Portuguese?" I said.

"Mm hmm."

I could have been mad at her for many things, for leaving us, for never calling or writing or sending me something on my birthday. But what I was mad

at her for now was that she had caught me dancing, that she had snuck up on me. "What do you want?" I said.

"I wanted to see you," she said. "You're my baby. I've been watching you when you sleep, you know that? At night a couple of times I came by."

"Are you coming back to California? Are you going to come back and live with us again?"

She walked to the other side of the roof and looked down into the street.

"Would you want me to come back and live with you and Frank? Is that what you want?"

I looked down at my feet, embarrassed that I didn't know. The thought of having a mother and a father again, suddenly confused me. Did my father want her back? For a second I saw in my mind my mother coming back to live in our house, but then the house disappeared and she was standing there next to it the way it looked after the fire. I saw her the way she had been last night, passed out, and imagined her that way in Ferris. I had never seen anyone else's mother like that.

"You want me to come back and bake cookies for you and help you with your homework?"

"I always get my homework done by myself."

"Smart boy," she said.

I was a smart boy; people had always said it. But I wanted her to say it differently, somehow. She made it sound as though I were a smart aleck, and that's not what I was.

"Where -- where do you live?" I asked. If I had had time to write questions down, I probably could have come up with a hundred, but right now I could only think of the most obvious things to ask.

"I have a place in Roxbury," she said, "near the club."

Roxbury. The dangerous place, where Black people lived. I felt alarm for her, protective. Was she safe there? We were Cape Verdean, Portuguese and African. Did that mean that people left her alone? *African*.

"That's where Black people live," I said.

"All kinds of people live in Roxbury. A lot of Cape Verdeans live there. Cape Verdean, Black, Puerto Rican."

"Why did you leave?" I said. "How come you just went away and left us?"

"That just wasn't the kind of life I could live," she said. "Maybe that doesn't make any sense to you. Sometimes you know you can't do something and it's stupid to try. So it's just easier to quit. I wanted to do the things I wanted to do. I loved you, but I just couldn't be your mother."

"Why did you even have me if you didn't want me, then?"

"I wasn't trying to get pregnant. I was dancing, making money, and it just happened. But when I knew I was pregnant, I wanted you. I knew I was supposed to have you, but after that it didn't seem like it was going to work."

I scuffed my sneakers around in the gravel. She made me sound like a puppy or something. There was a storm coming. The sky was turning a greenish gray beneath the heavy clouds and the air felt and smelled different, a chemical smell. I looked around and felt nervous, twitchy. I wanted to run and jump off the roof into the treetops, not to hurt myself, but for the feeling of it, the rushing feeling like diving off the high board at the pool in Ferris.

"When we were kids, my brother Johnny and me would come up here on the roof and watch the lightning until it got too close and scared us," my mother said. "It reminded me of the Wizard of Oz, like the hands of the Wicked Witch of the West reaching out over her crystal ball. Fingers grabbing." She moved her fingers like lightning.

"You liked dancing more than you liked me," I said.

"It's not like that," she said after a few seconds. "I couldn't be me without dancing. I knew Frank would make a good father for you. If I didn't go back to dancing, I would lose a part of myself.. It was me; I had to do it. Just like when you were a baby and you had to stop doing whatever it was and dance." She casually dropped her cigarette and stepped on it. She hugged herself and

turned to the dark sky. "Do you hate me?" she asked without looking at me. "Do you think I'm terrible?"

I didn't know what I thought. In the past when I thought about seeing her again, I assumed that I would know she was coming and would have time to get ready, to know what to feel and think. How were things supposed to go? I couldn't remember. Everything in the past, the things I had wanted and prayed about, were dark, silent. Other kids said they hated their mothers, that they were terrible, usually because they wouldn't give them the things they wanted, or because they hit them. Ryan said he hated his mother sometimes because she wouldn't stop his father from beating him. This wasn't like that. This wasn't like anything.

"No," I said.

"I want us to be friends," she said. "I can't make up all the past times, but we can try to be friends."

"Is Benny my brother?" I asked.

She didn't answer me until she had taken two puffs off her cigarette.

"I was seventeen when I had him," she said. "His father isn't your father, if that's what you're thinking. No one thought I could take care of him. They wanted me to finish school and get a regular job and all that *crap*, so Nana raised him like he was her son and we just pretended that that's the way it was."

She heard a car door closing in the street below and looked over the edge of the roof. "Shit," she said. She hurried past me to the door. "You keep out of the way."

Two men stood just inside the front door. One of them was talking to my grandmother. He was about my mother's age, handsome, dressed in a suit. He looked Cape Verdean, his nose thin, his cheekbones prominent, his complexion a light brown. He wore his wavy hair short and oiled. The guy who stood behind him was huge, built like a football player. He was completely bald and when he turned, facing away from them and looking back out into the foyer, something flashed in his ear -- an earring. I stood at the head of the stairs. My mother was standing at the bottom of the stairs, her hand on the railing.

"I don't know what you're talking about," my grandmother was saying. She was standing near my mother. "What kind of shit are you talking? What money?"

The Cape Verdean man looked over and saw my mother. "Where the hell you been?" he said.

"I got sick last night," she said, her voice low. "I fell out and they put me to bed."

"How you feel? You feeling kind of bad?"

She looked down and pulled the housecoat closer, then lifted her head and nodded.

"A little."

"She'd feel a whole lot better if she stopped messing with that shit," my grandmother said.

The man stared at my mother and patted the pocket of his suit coat. He turned back to my grandmother.

"What you mean you don't know about no money?" he said. He looked back at my mother. "What does she mean?"

My mother slowly sat down on the bottom step. She seemed tiny, like a skinny little doll. She drew her knees up to her chest and rested her head on them.

"What does she mean?" the man said. "Are you deaf?"

"I'm tired," my mother said.

"I'm tired, too. Tired of fucking around, tired of waiting for you to get your act together. Now I sent you over here to do something and I ain't heard word one from you, I got to come over when I'm busy to find out what's going on. How am I supposed to run my business when I'm depending on you and I got to keep following up on you, running you down?"

My mother didn't say anything, she just sat there like she was a kid getting scolded. Her shoulders slumped forward.

"You need to leave her alone, let her rest," my grandmother said. "She looks so old and tired, like she ain't slept good for years."

"Oh, she sleeps good all right," the man said. "She sleeps real good. Dontcha, baby?"

"Bobby," my mother said weakly.

"Bobby what? Huh? What you gonna beg for now?"

My mother said something so softly I couldn't hear her. He answered her back quietly, reached down and grabbed her face and made her look up at him. She tried to turn her face away, but he jerked her head back. Then he slapped her.

I had taken several steps down the stairs before I knew I had moved. Bobby looked up at me and I froze. The look he gave me scared me, but I didn't go back up the stairs.

My mother made a strange sound, not a cry exactly, almost like a laugh, a snort. My grandmother moved toward Bobby, but the guy standing over by the foyer reached out and grabbed her arm.

"Hey," she told him. "You don't touch me in *my house!*" The man didn't let her go. "You sonofabitch," my grandmother said. She tried to snatch her arm from the big guy's grasp. "Let me go!" The man didn't budge.

"Who's this?" Bobby said, looking at me. "What the fuck you looking at, kid?"

"Leave her alone," I said, my voice cracking.

"What, are you her new man?" he said.

"My boy," my mother said.

"Him? This is the other one of your bastards? What, you having a family reunion here?" He turned to the big guy. "You believe this shit, Del? She's got kids popping up all over the place." The big guy laughed and shook his head. "I guess that's all right," Bobby said, "as long as none of them call me Daddy." The big guy laughed again.

"Please," my mother said, "I need something."

Bobby shook his head, opened his coat and pulled out a pack of cigarettes. He lit one, took a deep drag, spit out the smoke. He cocked his head toward the other guy and waved him away. The guy let my grandmother go and she went over to my mother. She got between her and Bobby and put her hand on my mother's shoulder. My mother shook the hand off, then slowly looked up.

"You need to just let her rest," my grandmother said. "Whatever you got to talk about can wait."

Bobby smoked silently and looked up at me. "This shit's getting too complicated for me," he said. "I got to deal with *all* your family? Good thing your father and brother are dead or I'd have to mess with them, too."

"I know your people, Bobby Vieira," my grandmother said. "My mother and your grandmother were cumads, came over on the boat together. What kind of life are you leading, huh? Getting all messed up with this shit, with them niggers from Roxbury, all those crooks. How'd you end up like this?"

"Like this?" Bobby said, fingering the lapels of his coat. He held his hands up and turned toward my grandmother like a fashion model. "This what you mean? Huh?" He pulled out a wad of money from inside the coat pocket. "Like this? That what you want to know? Why I'm not a schoolteacher or working for the state? Why I'm not telling stories about how my grandmother worked in a cranberry bog and my father in the shipyard and now I work for the state tax department and my son'll be a doctor? That old slow train rags-to-Jordan Marsh story? Why don't you ask your enforcer about that. Ask him what he knows, what he learned over there. I learned my lesson in Korea. Different war, same story."

"That ain't no excuse," my grandmother said. "You don't see Benny running around like you and your kind."

Bobby and Del laughed together. "No," Bobby said, "he's too busy working for 'urban renewal.'" Del laughed even harder.

I walked down a few steps until I was close enough to my mother that she could turn and touch me. She heard me and looked around. Her eyes were wet.

"What you doing, baby?" she said, smiling sadly.

"Are you sick?" I said.

"I'm hurting a little," she said.

I thought she meant her face where Bobby had slapped her, but she was hugging her arms to herself.

The door to the kitchen opened and someone came out. Footfalls down the hallway. Benny stood just within my view.

"What's going on?" he said.

"He's talking crazy stuff," my grandmother said. "I don't know what he's talking about."

"None of your business, that's for sure," Bobby said.

"Yeah?" Benny answered back. "What goes on in this house is my business and I don't understand what business you got being here."

Del had stepped further into the house now and had his arms folded across his chest. He rocked on his heels.

"I thought you were only interested in burning shit down," Bobby said. "I don't know what other business you got."

"I know one place that *should* be burned down," Benny said.

"Comes in here talking nonsense and slapping people," said my grandmother.

"Slapping who?" Benny asked.

"My mother," I said.

"Ssssh," my mother whispered, and looked at me fiercely. "You just keep out of this."

"What's that?" Benny said.

He took a step toward the stairs and the other man moved quickly toward him. Benny reached behind him into the waistband of his pants and pulled out a pistol. He held the pistol down by his side.

"What?" he said. "You going to say something? You going to do something?"

The man didn't say anything. He held his hands up, palms toward Benny, and backed away.

"Cut the bullshit," Bobby said. He turned to his man. "He ain't gonna shoot nobody."

"Why not?" Benny said. "You think I can't? Don't want to? Don't know how? You ever kill anybody, Cool Breeze?"

"Fuck you," the guy named Del said.

Benny raised the gun and put it in the guy's face and cocked the hammer. I knew in my gut that he was going to pull the trigger and that nothing would ever be the same again. I moved back away from the railing to the wall. The air seemed to stop moving, to turn solid. I remembered my first night in Boston and the sound of the shot Benny had fired, how it wasn't a grand, loud explosion

like they made it sound on tv and the movies, but a cheap crack, a little, sharp nothing that could mean death, and I just knew that he was going to do it.

"Hey, hey," Bobby said, "you would really mess shit up. Shit's complicated enough as it is, wouldn't get no easier if you did something stupid like kill a man."

"Why don't you just make things easier by leaving then?" Benny said. "I kill him, I'm gonna kill you too."

"Bobby, please," my mother said. She reached up and took his hand but he snatched it away from her.

No one said anything for several seconds, no one moved. Then Bobby said, "I guess we better go then." He took a couple of steps back. "You," he said, turning back to my mother as he buttoned up his coat, "need to take care of business. Or else, what use are you to me? Huh?" He looked up at me as he spoke to her. "What you going to do, go back to being a mother? Hmm? You know that ain't your style." He made a gun with his hand and pantomimed shooting me, then winked and moved toward the door. He put his hand on Del's arm and moved him back into the foyer.

"Come on," he said.

"Don't you come back here," my grandmother said. "You let Laura rest. You leave her alone."

"Leave her alone?" Bobby laughed. "She can't leave Bobby alone. That's her problem. Ain't it, baby?"

"Just get the fuck out," Benny said.

"Yeah," said Bobby. "We're out. Just watch your back from now on."

They were gone.

"Ai, Nha mai," my grandmother said. She pressed both hands to the side of her face and smoothed them back over her temples. She spoke again rapidly in Creole to my mother, pointing her finger at her.

Benny still stood with the gun at his side. The outer door closed. He put the gun back in his waistband. "Shit," he said.

I had reached the bottom of the stairs and reached out to touch my mother, but she got up quickly and hurried out into the foyer. Outside the first clap of thunder boomed in the distance.

"Where you going?" Benny asked her.

She didn't answer. She fumbled with the foyer door and slipped outside. I pushed past Benny and ran after her. There was a large, gleaming car parked out front, facing the wrong way on the one-way street. Bobby was getting in the passenger side.

"Bobby!" My mother scrambled down the steps, holding the housecoat closed with one hand and the railing with the other. Bobby rolled down his window halfway. My mother reached the car and leaned against it, looking as

though she wanted to crawl in through the open window. Bobby handed her something, then pushed her away as the car lurched from the curb. She stumbled back from the street and dropped something. Lightning flashed and her elongated shadow leaped down the street as she stooped quickly to pick up a plastic bag. She turned and stopped when she saw me staring at her. Her hand shot into her pocket and she ran up the steps as the first fat raindrops splattered the sidewalk. She didn't speak to me as she entered the house. It was just as well, because I had no idea what to say back to her.

Benny was sitting at the kitchen table with a bottle of wine and a small glass in front of him. My grandmother was putting food away. She looked me over when I came into the kitchen.

"You didn't eat," she said. "Sit down and I'll fix you a plate."

"I'm not hungry," I said.

"You got to be hungry, you ain't eaten since lunch."

"I don't want to eat."

"Eat just a little jag and some linguica."

"For crying out loud," Benny said. "He don't want to eat, let him alone. He's big enough to eat when he's hungry."

"You watch your tone with me, you hear?" my grandmother said.

Benny answered her by draining his glass. He poured another. He pointed the bottle at me. "You want some of this? Here, you're getting to be a little man, why don't you?" There were several small glasses turned upside down on the table. He turned one over and put a few fingers of wine in it. He pushed the glass across the table to me. I didn't take my eyes off him.

"Who was that guy?" I asked.

"Nobody," my grandmother said. "A hoodlum." She opened the refrigerator and started putting pans and pots in it. "You sure you don't want nothing?"

"Who was he?" I asked.

"That was Bobby Vieira, big time Bobby Vieira. He owns a club and some women and part of the numbers business," Benny said.

"Owns women?"

"You know," Benny said. "Whores, prostitutes."

"Enough of that, now," my grandmother said.

"It ain't nothing he ain't already heard," Benny said. "You heard of prostitutes, right, Pee Wee?"

I had, but never in the context of them being real, only on television, and from kids at school. How could Bobby Vieira "own" them? I thought of my mother, the way she had looked so dependent on him. I felt hot. Was that was she doing with Bobby Vieira? No, that didn't make any sense. She was a

dancer. I stared at Benny's hands. I hadn't noticed before the scars on his knuckles, the curiously bent index finger on his left hand. He cradled the glass in his hands and gently swished the dark wine around in it.

"Did you really kill people?" I asked.

"Forget about it, Pee Wee."

"In Vietnam? Did you?"

My grandmother came to the table and stood between us. She slapped her hand down on the table. "I don't want to hear no more talk about this! I don't want to hear no talk about killing, about prostitutes, about nothing. You hear me? It don't do any good to talk about this kind of craziness!" She slapped the table again. She glared at Benny, but he refused to look at her. She made an inarticulate sound and went to the cupboard. She poured herself some gin into a glass and didn't bother with ice. She went into her bedroom.

"In Vietnam?" I asked again.

"Forget it," he said. He drank some wine. "She's right."

I looked at the glass of wine he had poured for me. My grandmother was out of sight. Benny looked me in the eye, his gaze a dare. I quickly snatched the glass and held it. It only burned for a few seconds when I gulped it down. Benny finished his glass and poured us both another one.

Then we heard someone saying, "Mercy, mercy, mercy."

It was Sister Margaret coming through the front door. She looked like a misshapen dwarf in the dim hallway light, the headdress of her habit making her look shorter and wider, and the two bags she carried weighing her down. Even though she was safe in the house, she still displayed her rolling limp she used when she was "collecting charity." I watched her come halfway down the hall, then I quickly drank my wine.

"Lord 'a mercy," Sister Margaret said, "a hot day! Hey, you little rascal. Help me with these here bags." I hesitated for a second, and she scowled and jerked one of the bags at me. I grabbed it and it nearly dragged me to the floor. "I been carrying these things seems like days," she said.

She carried her bag over to the counter and set it down with a grunt.

"Who you scam today?" Benny said.

Sister Mary motioned for me to bring the other bag over to her and started undoing her headdress. "That's right, right up there next to the other one. Shit!" She undid the headdress and pulled it off as though it were biting her. Her hair looked like a malformed rug, misshapen, uneven, dirty. She dropped the headdress onto the table and shot a quick glance at Benny. "Scamming, huh? Yeah, you don't never say nothing about no scamming when you eating some of the food I bring back, now do you? Didn't say nothing about no scamming when you had some of that nice ham last week, did you? Guess scamming okay then, now ain't it?"

Benny laughed at her and raised his glass in a mock toast.

Sister Margaret lowered her head, raised her eyebrows and pointed a finger at him. "Gotcha there, boy."

"That's right. You're too much for me," he said. "Sit down and have a drink."

"Praise the Lord, don't mind if I do," she said. She struggled out of the rest of the habit and sat down across from Benny, next to where I stood. Benny rose, turned a glass over for her and poured her a big drink.

"Enjoy," he said. "Come on, Pee Wee."

He picked up the bottle and went out into the hallway and I followed close behind.

"Yes, Lord, a good day!" Sister Margaret said.

I woke up with a headache the next morning. I was late getting to breakfast and when I winced at the noise my grandmother made with her pots and pans, Benny smiled at me over his coffee. I ate some runny scrambled eggs and drank orange juice, but that was all I could get down. Benny and Harold Davenport were the only ones still at the table. No one said much and I was thankful for the quiet.

"Where is she?" I asked Benny. He continued eating without looking at me.

"Where is --"

"Upstairs," he said, "in dreamland."

"Hey," my grandmother said to me. "The people at the repair shop called about the watch. You go with Benny to pick it up." She put a plate of food on a tray and handed it to me. "You take this up to her first."

Benny snorted. "Good luck getting her to eat."

I knocked on the door to her room. I heard murmurings inside, the sound of movement on the cheap bed. I knocked again and said it was me, but there was nothing. I used the key my grandmother gave me and opened the door and turned on the light.

Sher was lying on the bed naked, curled up into a ball and facing the wall. The covers lay twisted on the floor at the foot of the bed. Her clothes were piled haphazardly on a chair between the head of the bed and the window that looked out over Upton Street. She made some noise and moved her feet. I looked at the wall above the bed.

I opened my mouth to call to her, but the word "mother" would not come. I couldn't say any of the words -- "mom," "ma," "mommy." I knew they were all false. "I brought you some breakfast," I finally said. I took the tray over to the table and set it down. The table was bare except for a spoon and a hypodermic needle and a book of matches. I had seen this before on tv.

Heroin. It made people feel dreamy and they acted rubbery and happy.

Junkies.

I put my hand on her shoulder, still not looking at her. Her skin was hot and dry. I had never felt anyone so hot before. I tugged at her, increasingly rougher, until finally she flung her arm at me and half turned over. I saw one of her breasts, small and slack, and felt ashamed. She looked up at me, but her eyes were unfocused. She made some more sounds, her eyelids fluttered, and then she was gone again, her head back and her mouth open. I shook her again. Nothing.

I carefully picked up the needle and held it so I could look at it in the light. I tried to squeeze the plunger, but it was already fully pushed in. It didn't weigh anything. I sniffed the needle, took it between thumb and forefinger and pulled it as though I were withdrawing it after an injection. I touched the tip of the needle to the inside of my arm, just up from a small mole that rested near the upper tendon.

"Ow."

I had accidentally pricked my skin. A hot rush of fear enveloped me. I looked intently at my forearm where the needle had broken the skin. Was there blood? Yes; not enough to make even a decent-sized drop, but there was blood. I put the needle down and wiped the blood off with my hand. Did I have some heroin in me now? I took a step back and waited and felt a combination

of dread and a fluttering excitement. I listened to traffic outside, a tenant climbing the stairs, the rustling of the sheets as my mother turned in her sleep, my own breathing. I waited and nothing happened. I was not changed; I was still me, whoever and whatever that was.

I suddenly wanted to hurt her, to take the needle and prick her with it to wake her. I picked it back up again to do so, but then I heard someone in the hallway behind me and laid the needle back on the table. When I turned around, whoever had been there was gone. I left the light on, closed the door and went back downstairs.

Benny and I walked in silence. I missed not having Eduardo with me, but things were different with Benny now. I wasn't quite so afraid of him. He was my brother. Every once in a while I would say the word quietly to myself, and it felt alternately natural and strange. Brother. I knew brothers back home and they were all different. Sometimes they fought like born enemies, sometimes they were best friends, a lot of the time they just ignored each other.

Occasionally I had wondered what it would be like to have a brother, but I didn't know then how that would happen. My father was still married to my mother. I had heard friends of his talking to him about getting a divorce because she had deserted him, but he never did anything about that that I knew of and he never saw other women.

I would not play baseball with Benny, or go fishing or work on cars with him. We would not go swimming, or hunting out on the canal, or hiking at Yosemite. Those were things that brothers did in another place, not Boston. Here, we would do the things that Benny did. Since I couldn't imagine him back home in Ferris, I would have to settle for what would happen here.

"You still got a big head?" he asked.

"A what?"

"Big head. You know, hangover. Your head still hurt?"

I hadn't given much thought to my head since breakfast. I didn't necessarily feel anything. I shook my head vigorously

"What's that -- no?" he said.

"Checking to see if it hurts," I said.

He laughed. "You either got a headache, or you don't got a headache. You shake your head to find out and you give yourself one."

"That's just how I know sometimes," I said.

He snorted.

"What's heroin like?" I asked.

"You don't need to know," he said.

We were downtown now in the swirling confusion of a Saturday afternoon. We got separated for a few seconds by a group of Chinese kids who walked down the center of the sidewalk looking tough, a gang, probably. One of them

leaned toward me to bump my shoulder with his, but I didn't pay him any attention. I sidestepped people out into the street to catch up with Benny, who had moved ahead on the other side of the Chinese kids.

"Come on," I said.

"Come on, what?"

"What's it like?"

"It's nothing you gotta know about," he said. "Trust me."

"Did you ever do it?" I asked. "It's not like I'm going to do it or anything."

"You got that right," he said, "because if you ever do, if I find out that you are, I don't care where you are, California, China, I'm going to be on your ass." He looked over at me as we walked. "I'm going to be on your ass, because you get on that shit, and you die."

"Because you o.d.?" I said. He gave me a look. "I saw it on tv," I explained. "On the cop shows. Someone is usually a junkie."

"O.D.'s, yeah," he said. "That's the easy way out. Some of them just waste away, don't eat, just shoot shit, end up on the street. Like this sorry ass motherfucker up here."

On the next block people were giving wide berth to a filthy, shoeless man sitting on the sidewalk next to a trash can. It was impossible to tell how old the man was. He looked as though he had been rolled in soot and grime and then shellacked. He had a strange shine to him. His jumble of clothes was in tatters

and the wool cap he wore on the back of his head was perforated with moth holes.

Benny stopped in front of the man and grabbed me by the neck. "You want to look like this, smell like this? If you do, then you can get into shooting shit. But I'll get you first and put you out of your misery."

The man made a sudden movement, a spasm, and his hand shot out toward us, his feet moved, and I was instantly horrified that one of them might touch us. I wriggled free of Benny's grip and backed away, bumping into a woman carrying some bags. She mumbled something and disappeared into the crowd. I turned to Benny and he was pointing at me.

"You got it?" he asked.

"But you get high," I said, after we had resumed walking.

"Ain't the same thing," he said. "Not even close."

"On tv --" I started to say.

"On tv, what? You start with herb and you go straight to heroin, right?"

"Something like that. There was this guy who came to our school to talk about drugs. He said the same thing."

"Reefer and horse ain't the same thing," Benny said.

"Horse?"

"Shit, smack, horse, heroin. Ain't the same thing as herb. You can get high at night and go to your job in the morning. Shoot shit and all you're going

to do is shoot shit. Hell, we'd get high and go looking for Charlie, but motherfuckers who shot up ended getting their own asses shot up. You understand."

"I guess."

Benny stopped. He pointed to the repair shop across the street. "Go ahead. I'm not going in there and having them crawl all over me thinking I'm going to steal something. I'm too mad today."

I went into the shop and got my grandmother's watch. There was a thirty day warranty on the work, the guy behind the counter said. I paid him and went back outside. Benny wasn't where I had left him. I crossed the street to where he had been standing and looked around. Strange faces surrounded me. I was about to turn back home and start walking when he appeared out of the crowd, crossing diagonally across Washington Street, the main street that ran through downtown.

"Had to make a call," he said. "You got the watch?"

"Yeah. Thirty day warranty," I said, summoning up my best hokey tv announcer voice. He actually smiled.

"Groovy. Come on, we got to meet somebody."

"Who? I thought we had to go straight back."

"It's on the way. We're going straight back in a crooked kind of way. That's usually the way you get anywhere."

We were a few blocks off of Copley Square. The neighborhood was dirtier than Boylston Street, dark even at this time of day because of the tall buildings. We approached the YMCA.

"Don't say nothing to nobody," Benny said as we entered the lobby.

The elevator didn't come when Benny pressed the button. We waited for a minute, then took the stairs. The building was old and massive, everything steel and cold stone, the stairway ten feet wide. We reached a landing, turned and went up to the next floor. At the landing there were large windows in the wall, but they were frosted over and it was impossible to tell what lay beyond them. I heard the echoes of voices and of a piano being played somewhere. Someone was singing.

At the third floor we went down a long hallway almost to the end. Benny stopped in front of room 309. There was music coming from inside, the muffled sounds of a saxophone. Benny knocked and the door opened almost immediately.

"My man." It was the man we had met at the Vietnam demonstration, Coop. He had a bandana on his head and looked like a pirate.

"What's happening," Benny said.

"Watched you coming through the window. Come on in." He stepped back from the door and held it open. Benny entered and I followed him. "Hey, my little man," Coop said, and held his claw out for me to shake. He laughed

when I hesitated and stared at it. I realized he was testing me and started to reach for the claw. He pulled it back and used it to close the door.

"Welcome to my home, sweet home," he said. "Paid for courtesy of Uncle Sam."

It was a room much like the rooms in my grandmother's house, but it looked livelier because Coop had posters on the walls and some extra furniture, chairs and a coffee table. He had his own bathroom, too.

Benny walked over to the window and leaned out. He stayed like that for a long time. Coop went over to the small record player he had in the corner of the room and changed the record and put something on I recognized. It was the Santana album that some kids back home had.

"This boy can play that old guitar, that's for sure," Coop said. "Wish I had something to offer you, little man, but alls I got is contraband."

He pulled a joint out from under the bandana on his head and lit it. Benny pulled himself back in from leaning out the window. "Man, sometimes I just want to watch people," he said. "Just watch them and not feel I have to be afraid of them, or be ready to shoot them. You know what I mean?"

Coop nodded and handed him the joint. Benny held the joint, then looked at me. "We got to talk some business," he said. "Why don't you go downstairs and hang out? You know where we are in case you need something."

"There's a pinball machine in the lobby," Coop said. "It don't tilt when you shake it, so if you need to, you can pick it up and move the ball where you want."

"Go ahead," Benny said.

Downstairs I asked the guy at the front desk where the pinball machine was and he pointed to the left without looking up from his newspaper. I went down the hallway and saw the faded word GAMEROOM painted over a doorway. There was no door. Inside, the room was lit by a set of yellow bulbs high in the ceiling that cast a pale glow on the three pinball machines. All of the machines were decorated with paintings of women with large breasts and hair like flowing manes. One machine had a baseball theme, the next gambling, the third motorcycles. The first two had Out Of Order signs taped to them, and profanity and obscene pictures written on the signs. I fished a quarter out of my pocket and put two games on the motorcycle machine and started to play.

Pinball was a frustrating game for me. I never played that much at the bowling alley in Ferris, which was the only place in town with machines. I could never react quickly enough to do all the clever trapping and saving that the older guys always seemed to pull off. Everyone knew that the machines were rigged, but still it was possible to win and rack up games if you were quick

enough. I would get the balls up at the top of the machine, get a little action out of the various traps and bonus bumpers, and then, quick as a wink, the ball would hit a magnetized track and drain right down the center of the machine. It was no different here. I had lost three balls and only scored several hundred points in what seemed like a matter of seconds. Stupid game. Then I remembered what Coop said about the machines not tilting, and on the next ball I began jerking and banging the machine to keep the ball in play, cautiously at first, then with more force and insistence. The machine was heavy, but I soon figured out a way of leaning over and grabbing the underside of the machine while I flexed the insides of my arms to operate the flippers.

I started racking up the points. The counters rolled up numbers by 10s and 50s. Bumpers and traps lit up and bells rang, accompanying the clicks, pops and clunks as the ball caromed around the upper part of the machine. The big-breasted women smiled.

I was dancing with the machine, wrestling it, bouncing its legs on the floor until the glass top rattled.

"Hey, kid, what the fuck?"

I shot a quick glance over my shoulder. Someone was standing in the doorway to the game room. I turned back to my game in time to save a ball from draining down the side chute by jerking the machine up and back. My arms and back were beginning to ache.

"Hey, what are you trying to do?" It was the guy from the front desk. He stood beside me now and had his hand on my shoulder. He squeezed. "What, you want to break this one, too? Come on, lighten up. Put it down." He pressed harder on my shoulder and I let the machine drop the inch or so to the floor. The glass rattled so hard I thought it was going to shatter. I used a flipper to trap the ball against the side bumper and held it there. The man went on, "somebody's got this machine all screwed up anyway so you can't tilt it, but you got to go and try to break the friggin' thing. Scram, okay?"

"But I'm not done," I said.

"You are now," he said, and pulled the plug. "Beat it."

There were few greater sins than pulling the plug on someone's pinball game, I knew, but there was also not much I could do about it.

"Give me my quarter back, then."

"Right," the guy said. "Come on, go." He waved me toward the door.

"This isn't fair," I said.

"Neither is cheating, you ever think about that?"

He followed me out into the hallway. "Now, if you're visiting somebody, go up and visit. If you're waiting for somebody, take a seat in the lobby. And if you ain't doing either of those two, hit the street."

He pushed his way past me and I followed him into the lobby. I was trying to think of something to say to him, something smartass that would make Benny proud, but my head was a jumble of thoughts, none of them a good cut-down.

I stood in the lobby and looked out to the street beyond. I casually watched the people walking past the "Y" and noticed that one man made several passes by the entrance. I recognized him as the guy who had come to my grandmother's house with Bobby Vieira. Strange. I wondered if he lived around there. It took several seconds before I understood that maybe it wasn't a coincidence. Maybe, I thought, he was here for a reason. Of course, stupid. He was here for Benny.

I ran upstairs not exactly scared, but propelled by the feeling that something was going to happen. At Coop's door I hesitated and listened. I heard music and the sound of Benny's voice. When I knocked, the conversation stopped immediately and there was nothing but the music for several seconds. I knocked again.

"What?" Coop asked through the door.

"It's me, Rory," I said, loudly at first, but then lowering my voice. "There's a guy outside waiting for us."

I turned and expected to see the guy turning up the hallway toward me. Coop snatched the door open and I hopped into his room. "Now what about some guy?" he said.

"A guy outside," I said. I saw Benny standing near the window, looking down into the street at an angle. "That guy who was with Bobby Vieira, the guy you --"

"Yeah, I see him," Benny said. "I must have pissed him off."

"You got trouble?" Coop said.

"Nah, man, he ain't nothing. I just can't be bothered with his shit now. You got a back way out?"

"Not a back way, but a side way. You go out the door and take the first hallway on your left, there's a window at the end and the fire escape with a weighted ladder."

"Good enough," Benny said. He stepped back away from the window and took a last hit off the joint he was smoking. He passed the roach to Coop.

"So, you understand what the deal is?" Benny asked him.

"Ain't nothing but a thing," Coop said.

"All right, then. I'll catch you later."

"You want me to do anything? Go out there and talk to my man?"

"Don't worry about it. Just let him sit out there wondering what's taking us so long."

"You got it."

"Come on, Pee Wee," Benny said.

"Groove on, little man," Coop said.

I was surprised by how calm Benny was. We slowly walked down the hall to the window and he crawled out on the fire escape. I hesitated to follow him. My grandmother had a fire escape on the back of her house which I sometimes crawled out on. It would sway under my feet and I thought sometimes I would hear it creak and groan.

"Come on," Benny said. "I ain't waiting for you." He stepped on the end of the weighted ladder and it slowly lowered toward the sidewalk. I crawled out onto the fire escape and carefully followed him down.

"What do you think he wanted?" I asked.

"Nothing good."

We walked to the end of this side street and cut up an alley. Every few feet Benny would cast a quick but unfrightened glance over his shoulder. "This is what we call a tactical retreat," he said.

"Tactical?"

"Some battles are not worth fighting. They don't accomplish anything toward your objective. The only times to fight are when you want to and when you have to. Last night was a had-to situation. I didn't want to, but there was no getting around it. Today, I don't want to and I don't have to. So I won't. You understand?"

"Yeah. That way you don't have to worry about losing."

"You choose the ground and the circumstances. Something Charlie taught us, for sure. We walked around all cocky, balls to the breeze, with that 'anytime, anywhere' attitude and it got a lot of motherfuckers dead, dead, dead. Charlie only fought when he wanted to or had to, and he always knew the difference."

"Why do you call them Charlie?"

"In the Army everything is coded. Called radio alphabet. If you call someone on the radio, they may not be able to hear you, so you spell shit. Alpha for A, Bravo for B, Charlie for C, Delta for D. So on. Viet Cong – VC, VC - - Victor Charlie. Charlie. Makes you think you know him. That way you think you know how to fight him, I guess. I know Bobby Vieira and his gorilla, though, and I sure as hell know how to fight them." I had a hard time keeping up with him. He stared straight ahead as he walked, squinting as if he was trying hard to see something. I couldn't imagine what he saw.

CHAPTER TWELVE

When we got back to the house after visiting Coop, it was around three in the afternoon and my mother still was asleep. This was how it was with junkies, Benny explained. The first priority in their lives was heroin, and when they scored, that became the focal point of their day, the time around which other things were oriented. After a while, most junkies would sleep during the day and come out at night, if they came out at all. If they were lucky enough to have the money to burn, and some of them did, they would just stay inside for weeks, shooting up and ordering take-out food. My mother didn't have that kind of money on her own, so we had to take care of her. She could be here for a week, she could leave tonight. When she wasn't here at the house, Bobby took care of her.

I thought about what that might mean, and it made me angry to think that Bobby Vieira had control over her, but I was angry with her, too. After all these years, this is what I found, a woman who let herself be slapped by a guy like that, a junkie. I had been a fool to wish for her to come back.

I gave my grandmother her watch and went upstairs. For the longest time I just stood outside her door. Junkie. Mother. Maybe I had been expecting too much; maybe just seeing her was all I should have asked for. She might be gone tonight, though, and I wouldn't even have a picture of her the way she was

now. I went downstairs to my room and got my camera. The only pictures I had of her were at least a decade old. I wanted some of her now to remind me of her someday if I needed to be reminded. I quietly went into her room. The air was close and smelled of body odor. I sat on the rickety chair by the door and lifted the camera to my eye, even though I knew there wasn't enough light. Darkness. My mother moved slowly, an arm swinging up from the covers as she rolled away from the wall. Her hand hung off the edge of the bed, the fingers indistinguishable in the dark.

This woman was a stranger. The life she had chosen for herself had very little to do with me. She smelled unlike any woman I had known, unlike Delores or any of the customers who came to the China Star. She had seemed beautiful and glamorous that first night when she had surprised me in my room, a woman who had been places and done things, and for a while I was dumbfounded by her presence and forgot what she had done to me. Junkie. Mother.

I fidgeted with the camera strap, wound it tight around the fingers of my left hand until I felt the fingertips bulge with trapped blood. Then I unwrapped the strap and did it again and kept on until my fingers were numb. Finally I turned on the light, and filmed her as she lay on the bed. The underexposure light came on in a corner of the darkened frame, but I couldn't do anything to make more light, so I continued shooting. I could only see the bed in the

suggestion of its angles and general shape. The wall behind the bed, though it was painted white, was a dull, uneven glow. Several times she moved slowly, carefully, arms and legs drifting as though she were dancing underwater, and I saw the vague movement and had to concentrate to figure out what I was seeing. I panned across the room. The table looked like the work of expressionist painters we had seen in art class last year, bold swatches of color suggesting legs and a surface. The hypodermic was just a dark shape.

Later I heard her coming down the stairs and got the camera and waited in my grandmother's bedroom. The door to the kitchen was open.

It was nearly eight o'clock. Dinner was long done and put away, although the aromas of my grandmother's cooking were strong in the moist summer air. The kitchen window was open and the fan on the sill was swiveling and blowing cooler air through the room. Over its steady hum the usual sounds of night played on – squealing tires, an argument in the alley below, sirens, a jet plane, the sound of the elevated three blocks away, its brakes wailing as it pulled into Dover Street Station. My grandmother was sitting with her back to the window, a half glass of gin in front of her. Harold Davenport had gone out to get the gin for her after dinner and was sitting with her having a drink himself. She had asked him to tell her one of his crazy war stories. As I put away the dishes and then went to my bed to lie down and listen to the sounds of the evening, I heard

snatches of his tale about fighting the Japanese on Saipan and Okinawa. Every once in a while my grandmother would exclaim, "Ha! Hot damn!"

Harold had finished another story when my mother entered the kitchen. At first I couldn't see her from my vantage point in my grandmother's bedroom. I raised the camera. All I could see through the lens was my grandmother, the table, and Harold's hands as they lay on the table cradling his glass.

"There's a plate for you in the oven," my grandmother said.

"Hmm," my mother said.

I heard her stop and open the refrigerator.

"What you want?" my grandmother asked.

"Cool off."

"Got the fan in the window. Go stand over there. You'll make the food all warm."

A few seconds of silence, then the refrigerator door closed and my mother shuffled into sight and disappeared on the other side of the room. She was wearing clothes I hadn't seen her in, a loose pair of slacks and a denim shirt. Her hair was wet.

Harold Davenport's fingers drummed first against the side of his glass, then on the tabletop. Then they picked up the glass and returned it to the table after a few seconds. The ice cubes clicked as they settled back into the bottom of the empty glass.

"That was a war," my grandmother was saying. "Everybody pitched in, everybody helped out. Not like this craziness here. What those Vietnamese ever do to us?"

"Communism," Harold said tersely.

"So? We want to fight Communists, Cuba's right here, why not fight them? Nah, it's all a bunch of baloney. Kids coming home all hopped up, talking crazy, talking about killing *babies*."

"Don't need no war for that," my mother said.

"Where were you during the war, Lil?" Harold said.

"Hingham Shipyard. I was a welder. You know Rosie the Riveter? I was Lil the Welder. Worked on battleships, seam welding in the hull, right up in the front of the ship where the men couldn't fit. I was the only one who could get all the way up there. Twelve hour shifts seven days a week for almost three months. I had so much overtime that they gave me a car! This was 1943. Couldn't buy a new car if you had a million bucks, except maybe if you had connections. Gave a me a 1942 Chrysler."

"And you were hell on wheels, weren't you?" my mother said.

"That food's still in the oven. You keep sitting there and blocking all the cool air."

My mother shuffled into view again, went to the oven. She opened it and reached in, burning her hand on the hot plate and swearing. She pulled a pot

holder from the hook on the wall over the stove and retrieved a foil-covered plate from the oven.

"1942 Chrysler," Harold said. "I remember. I went off in 1943 and when I came back, everybody was driving the same cars! Nothing new until '46.

What'd you do with that car, Lil?"

"Sold it. Sold it and used the money to buy this house."

My mother sat down at the table between them, facing me, but I was far enough back in the darkness of my grandmother's room that I knew she didn't see me. She uncovered the plate and looked at the meal with no expression on her face.

"How about that!" Harold said.

"This is a welding house!" my grandmother said. She drained her drink and set her glass down solidly on the table.

"You came out of the war with a house and a trade at least," Harold said. "I got back and all I could do was throw hand grenades and shoot an M-1 rifle. Not a whole lot of call for that as a civilian."

My grandmother heaved herself up from the table and went to the cabinet where she kept her liquor. She never kept the bottle out on the table, but returned it to the cabinet each time she wanted another drink. That way, if someone showed up, they couldn't just invite themselves to a shot. She poured some gin into her glass, opened a cupboard drawer and pulled out some

utensils, and came back to the table. She set a knife and fork next to my mother's plate. My mother stared at the utensils, picked up the fork. She started moving food around on her plate.

"Never picked up a welding tool again," my grandmother said. She returned to the table and sat down. "Hot work, too hard. Besides, all the men who used to weld and went off to the war came back and took the jobs. I went back to music."

"Went back to music? You ain't never said anything about music in the first place."

My mother, who had taken a few unenthusiastic bites of food, looked in Harold's direction and laughed faintly. She said something to him I couldn't hear.

"That's right," my grandmother said. "After I got back from New York and found out I was blacklisted from the cranberry bogs, I started playing music."

I didn't understand the word blacklisted. Was it something people did because they thought she was black? I remembered to check how much film I had left and pulled the camera away from my eye to check the meter. Half a roll left. When I looked through the lens again, my mother was sitting back in her chair, looking up at the ceiling, one arm in the air as though she were reaching for something floating there.

"-- been playing the drums for a while, since I was a kid," my grandmother was saying.

"Ma, I can hear that song now," my mother said. "What was the name of that song? The one I used to dance to when I was a kid and you were playing in the band?"

"What?" my grandmother said, a little annoyed. She hated being interrupted. She got up and moved around behind my mother and turned the oven off. My mother turned slightly to look over her shoulder and laughed. She raised her arms up over her head and seemed to be reaching back to my grandmother.

"That song, what was the name of that song?" she said. "I can hear it, but I can't remember what it was. You know, the one with all the drumming in it."

It looked, for a second, as though my grandmother was going to reach out and take my mother's hands. The hard-set corners of her mouth seemed to relax a little, softening not into a smile, but at least into an expression of warmth. Instead, though, she made some kind of patting motion toward the top of my mother's shoulder and the back of the chair and moved back out of sight toward the other end of the table.

"A Gene Krupa song," my grandmother said. "Damn if I can't remember the title, either."

"The drums, Lil?" Harold said. "That must have been something else, a woman on the drums back in those days."

"Something, hell," my grandmother said. "Played saxophone too. Heck, for a while the band I was in was an all-girl band! 1947. We were big here in Boston, Providence, New Haven, Harlem. Had write-ups in the paper, even did a radio show a couple of times."

I tried to picture some of the things she mentioned, but the cities were all strange to me except Boston. I imagined an orchestra of women playing saxophones and trumpets and my grandmother there in the center, pounding away on a set of drums. I thought of Ryan playing the air drums back in his garage at home.

Harold had finished his drink and set his glass down on the table. My grandmother took his glass to the cupboard and poured him another drink.

"I sure wish I could have seen that," Harold said.

"Those days are long gone," my grandmother said, and brought Harold his drink. "Gone like the buffalo."

"To Lil and the all-girl band," Harold said.

He raised his glass and my grandmother laughed with him and leaned across the table to clink glasses. I got tired of filming and put my camera down. I watched my mother as she started to eat again, slowly, like a child.

"That's what got me started," my mother said, glancing at Harold, then at my grandmother.

"What?" my grandmother said.

"You," my mother said. "You and the girls. All that music. I couldn't stop dancing, couldn't help it."

"Nothing wrong with *dancing*," my grandmother said. "We all dance, all the old Portugees dance. You just got to quit that *crap*. Killing you."

"Beautiful girl like you," Harold said. His voice had gotten higher and he was starting to speak in spurts, punctuated by slightly uncomfortable silences. "Don't need that -- all that drugs and -- stuff. Look at you -- you're young, young and beautiful -- so much."

My mother put her fork down and leaned forward on the table. "I ain't never fought the Japanese," she said to Harold. "And you don't know nothing about me."

"Yeah, but I do," my grandmother said. "So what you got to say to that?"

"Doesn't matter, does it?"

The sound of a fire engine outside the house was suddenly oppressively loud. The violent blating of its horn exploded through the open living room window and made the glasses in the cabinet rattle. I could feel the sound inside me. I jumped.

"Shit!" my mother said, jumping in her seat.

The blating continued on down the street. A second engine followed. The keening of sirens echoed throughout the building.

"Big fire," Harold said.

"The whole world's burning down," my grandmother said. "Been fires like this all summer. Landlords burning their own places for the insurance money. Over here, over there." She pointed toward Tremont Street, then in the opposite direction. "Crazy."

"Harold," my grandmother said. "Why don't you go find out where that fire is. Go on up to the roof and you can see where it is. How about that? I'll fix you another drink when you get back."

"Don't need no other drink. I'll just go take a look anyway." He slowly and carefully got up from the table and when he had stood, reached down and grabbed his glass, which still had some gin in it. He inclined the glass toward my grandmother and drained it. "Back in a jiffy," he said, and then I heard him knock his chair over, pick it up clumsily, and leave.

"You not eating nothing?" my grandmother asked my mother.

"I ate some."

"Some, not enough to make any difference."

"I'm not hungry, Ma."

"You're never hungry. You take that shit instead of eating food."

"Ma," my mother said petulantly. "I've never been a big eater."

I sat unmoving in the dark in the corner of my grandmother's bedroom, watching my mother. I felt a kind of electric feeling in my limbs that I got when I was just about to do something, but didn't know exactly how or why to do it, like standing on the high dive board at the pool with the water sparkling way below and a bunch of kids on the ladder behind me impatiently waiting.

"You're skin and bones," my grandmother said.

"Bobby likes me like this," my mother said. She picked some more at her food. "I'm a dancer. I can't put on weight."

My grandmother's hands made a sweeping back and forth pattern on the tabletop. A pack of cigarettes and a match appeared on the table next to her glass. She lit a cigarette. "Dancer," she said. "When's the last time you did any dancing?"

"Couple of weeks ago," my mother said quickly. "Just like old times. Bobby Saunders and the company came through and I did some numbers with them. It was good. I was good."

"Like shit," my grandmother said. "Too old to be dancing anyway."

"Old is how you feel," my mother said.

"And how you look. You sleep half the day and don't eat. You can't keep this up."

"I remember how you used to be."

"What are you talking about?"

"When I was dancing the first time and I had to leave Benny with you and you were trying to run this house and still play in this band or that band, and Pa would get mad about all the running and you dragging Benny around or leaving him here."

"That's because you couldn't take care of him."

"You still did what you wanted to do," my mother said. "You were almost as old as I am now."

"Different. I had a house to live in, a husband, money, and I wasn't no -- no junkie. If you didn't have that Bobby Vieira taking care of you, what would you do? Huh?"

"I didn't come here for you to yell at me about what I'm doing or not doing."

"Your boy? Is that why you come, so he could see what his mother is?"

"Ma, stop."

"You think this is good for him?" my grandmother asked. "See you like this, hanging around with that sonofabitch and his dirty business? What kind of thing is that for him?"

"Me? What about you and this house of -- of rejects and winos? Huh? What about that?"

"I ain't ashamed of nothing," my grandmother said. "These people live here. What they do is their business. They ain't family to nobody here."

My mother reached across the table and snatched up the pack of cigarettes. "I came to talk to you about money," she said through a billow of smoke.

"Money? What money? I ain't got no money to give you, if that's what you're saying. You owe somebody money?"

"No, Ma," my mother said. "You do."

"Me? What are you talking about?"

"Last year, you needed money for the back taxes, you remember? I gave you five thousand dollars. Remember?"

"Was the least you could do," my grandmother said, "after all the shit I put up with from you, taking care of your kid all those years, getting you out of trouble. You want that money back now?"

"No," my mother said, "Bobby does."

"Bobby? What kind of shit is this?"

"I borrowed the money from Bobby," my mother said. "I figured I could pay him back over time, or maybe he would just say forget it. Maybe you'd give me some."

"You got that money from him and you didn't tell me? I thought it was your own money."

"I ain't got no money of my own, Ma. I ain't got shit. You know that. How'm I going to have anything?"

My grandmother slammed her hand down on the table and the cigarette flew from her fingers and rolled across the table and onto the floor.

"I thought it was your money! You never said anything about Bobby!"

I saw where the cigarette landed and watched the spot, expecting at any moment that it would begin to smolder on the torn and old linoleum, preparing to leap in and put it out.

"You wouldn't take it if I told you it was from him," my mother said.

"You're damned right I wouldn't have! Taking money from the devil!"

"You needed it! What would you do without that money? What were you going to do -- let the city take the house?"

My grandmother got up from the table and walked around it, into sight, holding one hand up to her head as though she were going to massage her temples, but not doing anything with it. She paced out of view, then came back.

"Dirty money from that, that gangster. Ai, Dios!"

"I didn't think he would want it back," my mother said. "I just didn't think he would."

"Are you crazy?" My grandmother stopped pacing. She bent over and crawled underneath the table and retrieved the cigarette. "What, you think somebody like that does you favors? You ought to have more sense than that. He's a crook, a criminal."

"He says he loves me."

"Says he loves you, then he smacks you *around*? No man never put his hand on me and got away with it. No man!" She shook her head. "I thought it was *your* money. I never knew, never knew," she said softly.

"He said that if you can't pay it back, we – you can work something out."

"Ha! Work something out! Yeah? What does he want to work out? Does he want a piece of my hide? My soul? No; I know what he wants, he wants a piece of this house, don't he? That's what it is. Isn't it?"

My mother leaned forward and put her head in her hands. "Maybe. I don't know. He didn't say."

"He didn't say, but you know that's what it is, don't you? Don't you?!" My grandmother grabbed my mother by the shoulder and shook her hard, so hard that the table moved across the floor an inch or so. "Don't you!"

"I swear, Ma," my mother said, shrinking, her hands up. "I swear, I don't know!"

My grandmother crossed the room again and went to the window. She must have been leaning out and looking at the backyard because her voice sounded far away when she spoke again.

"I been in this house almost thirty years. Ever since the war. Raised you in this house. Raised that first boy of yours. Greenhorns from the old country used to come here to stay before they knew where they were going. They

would send back word and everybody knew that this was a place where you could come. 39 Upton Street, Boston, America."

My mother slowly got up from the table. She looked like she was crying, but she made no sound. "What -- what you going to do?"

"Have another drink," my grandmother said.

Harold came back in.

"I seen the fire," he said. "It's way over, over by Berkeley Street. It's a big one; the sky's all orange and bloody. No need to worry."

"Too bad," my grandmother said. "Too bad it all doesn't burn down."

I sat on my bed, my hand on the camera. I listened for sounds from the hallway. My mother had gone back up the stairs. Harold had sat down with my grandmother at the table again and I could hear the low sounds of the small tv in the kitchen, a Red Sox game, the sound of my grandmother pacing in the kitchen. "What's up, Lil?" I could hear Harold say.

What was going to happen to them, to the house, was also going to happen to me. I was living here now. The thought of returning home soon, of returning home at all, seemed unreal. My father's words again came back to me, I was going to "live" with my grandmother for a while. Live with her in this house. Or maybe not even in this house, if Bobby Vieira did something about the money she owed him. I wanted to be home.

I rubbed the cool metal of the camera and thought about times I had used it back home. I thought of how stupid it was to film what Ryan and the others had done. Rather than filming them, I should have stopped them. Then none of this would have happened. I would be home and I wouldn't know anything about this. But that wouldn't change what was happening here. This would still be going on, only I wouldn't know about it and I wouldn't care. But I did know and I did care.

My father would be getting ready for the dinner crowds now. It was Friday, the busiest night of the week. One bad Friday night could ruin the whole month, he used to say. He would always check the newspaper to see if something was happening in Barton on a Friday night, an event that would draw people out of town. He never closed the restaurant or did anything different, even if he found out something was coming up; apparently just knowing seemed to make him feel better.

I imagined him now in the kitchen doing the prep work for dinner. He was always the most intense then. The actual cooking he didn't worry about, because he had done every meal hundreds of times. But the prep work was different. One mistake and there went a finger. It didn't matter how many times you chopped vegetables, the knife would cut just the same. So when he chopped the celery and carrots and bok choy and onions, he was completely focused on what he was doing. I knew that he wasn't thinking of me now, as I

was thinking of him. I wondered if he was thinking about me at all. When was he going to call and say that I could come back home?

Then I wondered if he knew all about my mother. Maybe that was why he had sent me here: he knew that she was around and was thinking that I would stay with her now. Maybe that's what he wanted. My stomach quivered. Maybe that was it; maybe I had gone too far and he wanted to get rid of me. My chest tightened and I felt caught, trapped. This was going to be my life now.

Benny didn't come in until late. My grandmother had gone to sleep, and my mother, after going out on the front steps and smoking a couple of cigarettes, had gone back upstairs. She might have gone up to the roof, but I couldn't tell. I lay on the sofa, just listening. Listening for Benny. Then I went looking for him.

He didn't answer his door when I knocked the first time, so I kept at it. I knew he was in there because I had recognized his footfalls when he mounted the stairs. I hesitated to knock again, but it was important that he know what was going on. If he didn't find out now, he would be mad later on.

"What is it?" he finally said. He sounded tired.

"It's me," I said.

"I figured. What you want?"

"I have to talk to you."

"Talk."

"Come on, Benny." I didn't mean to whine, but that's what it sounded like even to me. "I have to tell you." The door opened a crack and I heard him walking back across the room to his bed.

I pushed the door open. It was hot and there was a strong odor in the room, a smell I didn't recognize right away. I was trying to see Benny in the dark. He was sitting on his bed with his back to the wall. There was someone with him on the bed – a woman, I could tell, from the dark outline of her hair. I hadn't heard her go up the steps with him. I was confused and momentarily forgot what I was going to say. "I can't see," I said.

"You said talk, not see. So talk."

The woman didn't say anything. She shifted her weight on the bed and the springs creaked. Was she naked? Was she the whore my grandmother mentioned the first night I was there?

"Nana and -- my mother were talking tonight." My voice sounded too loud in the dark room and I felt embarrassed. I could feel the woman watching me. "They were talking about this money Nana got from her last year to pay some taxes. Nana thought it was from her, but it was really from Bobby Vieira."

Benny's joint glowed in the dark. That was one of the smells, marijuana, but there were others hanging in the close air of the small room. "No fucking shit," Benny said. I watched the glowing end of the joint as he passed it to the

woman. She said something to him in Spanish, it sounded like, her voice deep and dreamy, and lifted the joint to her mouth. When she sucked on it the glowing end lit her face and her upper body for a few seconds. I couldn't tell if she was pretty or not, but she was barechested. I turned my face away, then looked back. She laughed

"He wants the money back," I said. "But Nana says she doesn't have it."

"Shit," he said, laughing. He took the joint back from the woman. "I told her then that something was wrong, but she didn't want to hear that. All she could see was money. Damn her."

The darkness was making me feel disoriented. The joint glowed brightly again and I could see the outlines of Benny's features in the dim orange pulse of light. The woman ran her hands through her hair and snuggled close to him.

"You want to hit this?" he asked.

The glowing coal on the end of the joint bobbed in the air. "I don't know," I said. I wanted to know about this woman. I wanted to touch her body.

"It's not as bad as everyone says," Benny said. "And it's not as good as everyone says, either. You understand that?"

"Yeah."

He didn't move off the bed toward me and I didn't move from where I stood. I felt sweaty-hot now and the smell in the room was beginning to make me sick. It was the smell of gasoline and smoke and sweat.

"I smell gas," I said.

"What's she going to do?" he said.

"My -- mother?"

"Nana. What's she going to do about the money?"

"I don't know. What's going to happen if she can't pay it back?"

The bedsprings creaked and the coal on the joint moved up and to the side, and then Benny was pulling aside the shade on his window and light from the streetlight outside silhouetted him. I looked toward the bed and saw the woman's face. She was older than I thought, older than Benny, but she looked like she was pretty, or had been once. She stared at me until I looked away.

"Nothing good, that's for sure," he said. "You still want her to go back to California and be your mother again?"

"I don't know," I said. But I did know.

"Maybe it's not her fault," Benny said. "There's some people just can't say no to shit, and they get in trouble, and she's one of those people. I tried to figure her out a long time ago, and there's no real figuring. I used to hate her so much, but that didn't do anything. It's just something inside her. Like me and reefer and Nana and her gin and a bunch of other stuff. Just something in our blood, I guess."

I could hear that blood in my ears, the loud whoosh of it as my heart pounded. The woman sighed heavily and patted the bed next to her. She said something to Benny.

"You know what I'm talking about?" he said.

"Like how I like to watch things burn?"

"Yeah, like that. But you don't live here; you can get away from it. You got the Chinaman at least to help you out. Us --" he paused to take another hit on the joint "-- we're here. Nana's got it, Papai had it. You heard those guys at the VFW talking about him. They sounded like they thought he was a great guy, but they were afraid of him sometimes, too."

I thought about my grandfather in his casket, the waxiness. He didn't look like someone to be afraid of.

"I gotta get some sleep," Benny said. "If you ain't gonna take a hit off this, I'm going to finish it. Here." He pulled the shade farther open so a rectangle of weak light shone on the floor.

I crossed to the window where he stood and he held the joint to my lips.

"Just suck in a little tiny bit and hold it," he said.

I tried to do as he said, but almost immediately coughed.

"Try again."

The smell of gasoline on his hand made me afraid that we would burst into flames, but he wasn't afraid. I held the smoke in for a couple of seconds this time before I coughed it out.

"That ought to do you," he said.

"I don't feel anything."

"You don't think you do, but you do, trust me. Now get to bed."

I made my way back across the room, avoiding looking at the woman on the bed. At the door I turned back around.

"Did you burn something tonight?" I asked Benny.

My ears seemed stuffed with cotton and my voice came back to me from far away. I heard Benny climb onto his bed, saw the joint glow one last time.

"Close the door," he said.

I lay on my bed and felt myself floating. I had tried lying there in the darkness, but the feeling that something was there in the room with me made me get up and turn on the small lamp near the sofa. Its warm glow reassured me. The furniture seemed to be gleaming. I closed my eyes and listened to the sounds that were now familiar in the night, heard them clearly, felt them on my skin. The giddiness I had felt earlier that evening.

I listened to the sound of the blood in my ears. The whooshing of it seemed to grow louder, and my giddiness faded. Then I heard the beating of

my heart coming, it seemed, through my pillow, that steady thumping, sending my blood with its messages through my body.

I heard the faint sound of music, bits of it coming to me through the sound of my blood. At first I thought at first it was from a car radio. I lay still and tried to hear, but it was like listening to sounds coming to you on the wind at night; when the wind changes, the sound recedes. I sat up and cocked my head toward the window, then toward my grandmother's bedroom and the kitchen.

It sounded like the music Coop had been playing in his room. Maybe Coop was visiting Benny. But no, the woman was up there. I carefully got out of bed and went around to the window and looked out. The gleaming world was motionless, dark cars nestled to the curb, no one moving inside them. The world looked like it was underwater. A man walked up the street from Tremont and stopped in front of the building to light a cigarette, then continued on. A cab hurtled down the street and ran over something metal that clanged. I leaned down and put my ear to the window screen.

The music was out there and inside too. From the bedroom upstairs, through the open window, the music was sliding out into the night. My mother's room. I listened closer. I heard a sliding, shuffling sound, then a faint kind of thumping. Dancing.

I went to the hallway door and opened it a crack. From a few of the rooms up above I could hear music now, the lonely sound of radios in a rooming

house. I listened for the music my mother danced to, and occasionally picked out the sound of a trumpet among the other instruments. I stepped out into the hallway, then onto the stairs, and then began, step by step, to climb to the second floor.

Her door was partially open. She was dressed as she had been the first night. My grandmother had put a mirror up on the wall in the room for her, and she was standing before it, applying makeup and moving to the music from a small radio on a stand next to the bed. Every once in a while she would forget the makeup and just sway to the music, turn in a small circle, her eyes closed, her arms making figures in the air. She hummed and softly sang words I couldn't hear.

When I pushed the door open a little more to get a glimpse of the table, I must have made some noise. She turned and looked toward the door. "Who's that?" she said. Her voice sounded uncertain. I wanted to slip back away from the door and disappear downstairs, embarrassed that I had been watching her. Instead I stood there, silent. "Who is it?"

"It's me," I said, pushing the door open more.

She looked relieved to see me, happy almost. "Hey," she said. "What are you doing up so late?"

"It's not so late," I said. "It's summertime, anyway. I always stay up in the summer."

"That's right," she said. She put her makeup away in her purse and sat down on her bed.

"Come here."

I entered the room, glancing at the table.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

"I -- I was looking to see if you had taken some more heroin."

She lit a cigarette and dropped the match into a coffee can on the floor beside her bed. "No," she said. She didn't say it with any emotion, but I felt chastised by the expression on her face. She looked hurt.

"Are you leaving again?"

"Yes," she said. "I'm going to the club."

"Are you coming back?"

"Probably not tonight. Later on, though."

She smoked in silence. I listened to the music on the radio.

"You like this kind of music?" she asked. "Jazz. That's what it is."

"I don't know," I said. "It's kind of like old fogey music."

"You'll like it later. You have to learn how to listen to it."

"I like rock," I said.

"Hmm," she said. "I only listen to that when it's on some radio by accident, like when you take your car in for work and they change the station to listen to while they fix it. This is the kind of music I dance to. On stage. I do the kind of

dancing you do." Reminded of my dancing on the roof, I felt myself get warm. "It's how I learned how to dance, listening to music like this all the time at The Blue Flame."

I remembered hearing her talk about being a kid, and I realized that she had a life as a kid here in this house, long before me. There was much more to her life beside me.

"Frank's a good father, isn't he?" she asked.

"I guess," I said. The night he had hit me flashed into my mind and I felt embarrassed. Of course he didn't want me back any time soon. He was still angry with me.

"Sometimes I would think about you and worry, but most of the time I just knew that everything was okay. That's why I chose him to be your father, because I knew he was a good man. He wasn't the handsomest man, or the funniest. He was just good. It's hard finding a man who will be good to a boy who isn't his own." I thought of how Mr. Azio treated Ryan, his own son. "You do good in school, huh?"

"Yeah."

"You're smart, that's why. You got your mother's looks and your father's brains."

It was strange to hear someone other than Frank Chen referred to as my father, but of course I knew that there was someone else, a mystery figure,

more distant and alien to me than even she was. I hardly ever thought about him.

"Who is he?" I asked.

"Just a man I forgot about long ago."

"Was he Cape Verdean, too?"

"Mm hmm."

"What does he do?"

"I don't know. I haven't seen him in years. He used to be in business, that's all I remember."

"What was his name?" I asked.

Outside a car horn honked. She went to the window. "That's my cab," she said, and leaned out the window to wave. "I gotta go."

"What's going to happen?" I said.

"Happen? What?"

"About Nana and the money."

"How do you know about that?"

"I heard you talking in the kitchen."

She crushed her cigarette out in the coffee can and turned off the light on the table next to her bed.

"Well, you're not supposed to listen to people's conversations. That's eavesdropping. It's not polite."

"I was just sitting there," I said. "What's going to happen?"

We were out in the hallway. She closed the door but didn't bother to lock it. "Nothing's going to happen," she said. "Everything will be okay. I'll take care of it."

She smiled. The makeup made her look young again, as she had that first night, before the lights came on and I could really see the lines on her face.

"That guy's not a very good guy."

"Sssshhh. Bobby Vieira is none of your business. I'll take care of him. You just take care of Nana. Come on, walk down with me."

I went down the stairs ahead of her. Once she reached out and lightly touched my head. I stopped and turned to see what she wanted, but she just smiled and nodded for me to continue.

Outside the cab had pulled up to the curb a few car-lengths down the street from the house. There were several people on the street. Some men were talking on the stoop of a house. One of them said something to my mother. I turned to see who the man was, but my mother put her hand on my arm and kept me going.

"You called the cab?" the driver said.

"That's right," she said. "The Starlight Club in Roxbury."

"Alrighty," he said.

"You be good," she said. "I'll see you in a little bit."

"I don't know when I'm going home," I said.

"I'll see you before then." She smiled and started to get into the cab, then stopped. "Give me a kiss?" she said.

She leaned forward and gave me a quick kiss on the lips and I started to give her a hug, but it was too late, she was in the cab and closing the door. She rolled down the window. "See you later, alligator."

I knew there was a reply to this, but I couldn't think of it. The cab was moving away. I watched the cab, then just its taillights, recede down the street. "Okay," I said, and then, when the cab was gone around the corner, "in a while, crocodile."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

I was cleaning up in the kitchen after breakfast the next morning when somebody knocked on the door. My grandmother went down the hallway and came back looking annoyed. Eduardo was behind her, carrying a leather satchel.

"I brought something to show you," he said. "It's a map."

"Yeah?"

"Hey," my grandmother said, "you finished cleaning up?"

"Yeah."

I made a sweeping gesture with my hand to show her my handiwork. Over the past weeks I had gotten the breakfast cleanup routine down to a precise, efficient labor. The only thing that slowed me down was when someone dawdled over their meals. This day, however, everyone seemed to have something to do, and now everything was cleaned and put away.

"Just stay out of the way, then," she said. When I had showed Eduardo into my section of the living room, she added, "And keep an eye on him so he don't steal nothing. You know how them Puerto Ricans are."

"Nana," I said, "he's my friend."

She smiled and pointed a finger at me. "That's just when they rob you blind, when they got you thinking they're your friend! Sneaky people! Just watch it. You don't watch it, and you'll find out."

Eduardo had already opened his satchel and pulled out a large flat atlas and set it on the coffee table in front of my sofa bed.

"How come you haven't come over the last couple of days?" I asked.

"I've been busy," he said. "How come you didn't call me up?"

"I've been busy, too."

"There was another fire," he said.

"I know." I didn't tell him about Benny, how he smelled last night, how he acted funny.

"It was two blocks from our house. My mother wouldn't let me go see it, but I went up on the roof with my brother and we watched it from there. It was pretty cool. There were about a hundred fire engines there."

"A hundred? No way."

"Ambulances and police cars, too."

"Ambulances?"

"Yeah, but there was nobody killed or nothing. They just do that just in case. Hey, here's my new map."

He had opened the atlas and pulled out a piece of butcher paper that had been folded over several times. I ignored the butcher paper and looked at the

map in the atlas. It was a topographical map of somewhere in Asia. While I was busy trying to figure out the map's location, he was unfolding the butcher paper on the table top.

"This is the map," he said, pointing to the butcher paper. "I made it. It's my own map."

City streets lay spread out on the butcher paper in different colors. The street names were carefully penciled in, and down the middle of Washington Street ran the elevated. I recognized the names of the streets I had walked. At one end was a portion of the Common, and at the other end was Massachusetts Avenue, or Mass Ave, as people called it. Individual buildings were noted on the map, but not all of them. There were x's here, geometric shapes there, in different colors. I saw the supermarket where I had bumped into him, and on Upton Street there was a special marker at number 39.

"This is the map of things that have happened to me," he said. "Things I did and where I did them." In some places little stick figures had been drawn in. I saw several at 39 Upton Street. One of the figures was holding something vaguely cylindrical.

"What's this?" I asked.

"That? That one holding a glass? That's your grandmother. That's a glass of gin."

We laughed. I pointed to another one of the figures. It was holding a broom.

"Is that me?"

"Yeah."

"What do the colors mean?"

He pointed to a red x. "Red is bad stuff that happened. Right here, in front of my house, is where I saw a cat get run over by a cab when I was in the second grade. Over here is where this guy got shot one night, and when we went to school in the morning his body was still there. This is the place where I got beat up by these Irish kids and they broke my tooth." He looked up at me and smiled. "But that was a baby tooth and I grew a new one."

"What about black x's?"

"Black is scary stuff. Over here is where my brother had an asthma attack one time and we had to have an ambulance take him to the hospital. This is where this Doberman Pinscher dog lives that tries to get you through his fence on the way to school. This is the place where this guy was standing in the street one time with a gun. He didn't shoot nobody, but there were police all around and they all had guns, too."

"Blue?"

"Blue is good stuff. This is the library, where I check out all my books. Over here is where I kissed a girl the first time. That's the church where I took first communion."

I noticed that the supermarket had a green mark on it.

"What's green?"

"Green is stuff that I don't know about. Like here, at the supermarket. That's where I met you. It was bad because we got in trouble, and I sort of finked on you, but it was good because we met and now we're friends. But I don't know how to decide what to call it. So it's green."

I carefully looked over the map. There was far more red and black than there was blue or green. What would my map of Ferris look like? Almost the opposite of Eduardo's, except for the last week or so. The fire at my house was black and red. So were the last few days here in Boston.

"A lot of stuff's been happening here," I said. I told him about the past few days.

"Your mother?" he said, incredulous. "Wow. Are you going to live with her now?"

"She's not going to come back to California. And I'm not going to stay here, I don't think."

"Hmm," Eduardo said. He looked down at his map. "That's blue, though. That's good because you didn't see her for a long time and now you did. If you were making a map, then you'd put some blue here."

"I don't know. Maybe it's green."

He stared at his map. "I think sometimes maybe you can decide later what color it should be, because maybe sometimes you don't really know until later if something was good or bad or scary. I don't know."

"Benny's my brother," I said suddenly.

"No way. Your brother? Really?"

"Really."

"He's scary."

"He's okay."

"That's because he's your brother."

Eduardo put his hand on the map and ran his fingers over the streets and the markings. "She's his mother, too!" he said, suddenly.

I told him about Bobby Vieira and the guy who was with him, and about Benny pulling the gun.

"That's black and red and green," he said.

"Green?"

"Well, because it was a good thing sort of that he helped your mother, but it was still bad because what happened to her and scary because of the gun."

"I guess."

"Is film for your camera expensive?"

"It's like three dollars to buy a roll and then you have to develop it and that costs about two dollars more."

"Five dollars," he said forlornly.

"I save up my work money from the restaurant and buy it at the Base Exchange. It's a store for military people and dependents, which is what they call wives and kids and stuff. But it's cheaper there than other places. My father buys some for me on my birthday too."

Eduardo looked down at his map, walking his fingers up Washington Street. "I thought maybe we could make a movie from my map."

"Like do what?"

"It would be like National Geographic. We would go places and you would film it and then I could tell all about it."

"But there's no sound." I explained to him about 8mm film. He wasn't deterred.

"I could write up what was going on and you could film that too. Like in old timey movies."

"I don't know."

"I have four dollars," he said. "You could put in a dollar and then we could do it."

I started to tell him that without a projector it would be useless, but the look on his face made me keep my mouth shut.

"We could start right now," he said. "We can start with the red stuff and end up with blue. And then if we have film we can do green."

It was as bad a day as you could get for filming with an 8mm camera without lights. Dark, almost purple, clouds squatted over Boston, promising rain but not delivering. If it had to be an extreme day of any kind, I would take blazing sun. Then I would have the choice of shooting in the shade. But in the almost dusk-like afternoon there was no way to make more light. The underexposure light kept flicking on and there was nothing I could do. I just kept filming, because I wasn't about to tell Eduardo that it was no good. When you're thirteen it's hard to wait another hour, let alone another day, to put a project into action. There was no assurance that the next day would be better anyway. Or the day after that. A weather system had stalled over New England, according to the weather man. It could be almost a week before things cleared up. So I obediently filmed and Eduardo led me through his past. Each black and red spot was much worse than mine, worse even than the things that had happened to me here in Boston.

"This is where we found the dead guy," he said, standing at the entrance to an alley. "He was right down there, lying down facing this way. He smelled bad and there were flies and stuff."

I shot Eduardo standing there talking and pointing, and then moved around next to him to get a shot of the alley itself. The light came on, but I kept on filming. I felt itchy and hot; I thought I could smell something evil and dark, the smell of death in the asphalt, a dead man's smell.

Back to Eduardo, holding up his map with his finger on the black mark denoting his place. "Now we'll go to where my dog got killed."

I had made us some linguica sandwiches for lunch. We had only covered about a third of the places when we stopped to eat at the park on Washington Street where Eduardo had scored his first run in baseball. We had about two minutes left on the roll. I was being as conservative as I could, but still it was obvious we weren't going to finish.

"We could do some more next time I get some money," Eduardo said through a mouthful of sandwich.

"I have another roll of film," I said without thinking.

I had been hoping that I could film my mother some more, or maybe Benny. My father might want to see them. Now that I had mentioned it to Eduardo I had practically obligated my self to use it for his project.

We sat on rough cement benches behind one of the two baseball diamonds in the park and ate our sandwiches watching some other kids play baseball.

"Do you think you're going to go home?" Eduardo said.

"Yeah, of course," I said quickly. "Why wouldn't I?"

"I don't know. Sometimes adults tell you things that just aren't true. Like I had a cousin who came from Puerto Rico with his family and they stayed for a while and they were supposed to go back for a vacation and then come back here to Boston. But they went and they never came back, and I think everybody knew from the beginning that they were going to stay when they went back there. But they told us that they were coming back. He was my favorite cousin. We used to draw things together."

"My father wouldn't do that," I said. "He never does anything like that. He's my friend." I hadn't realized it before, but it was true. "He always tells me the truth."

"Maybe so," Eduardo said.

I reminded Eduardo that we had to leave room to film his written descriptions of events. We shot the baseball diamond and went up on the elevated platform to film the place where he had fallen down onto the tracks last summer. He had fallen and bruised his shins, but he hadn't gotten

anywhere near the third rail. A man pulled him up from the tracks and he was okay. We tried to convince the man in the change booth that we didn't want to ride the train, that we just wanted to film the platform, but he didn't believe us and got mad at us for bothering him. Eduardo didn't want to spend the quarter, so it was up to me. I paid my fare and went up the stairs to the platform and filmed the tracks and came back down.

We were halfway back to Upton Street when the rain started coming down hard and fat. Thunder boomed and the air above the city seemed a yellowish green. Lightning shivered over the city and lit up Shawmut Avenue as we waited for the showers to pass under the awning of a Syrian fruit stand. An old man sitting at a stool near the cash register talked to us in Arabic. When we tried to tell him that we didn't understand him, he smiled and shook a gnarled hand at us, as though to chide us for playing with him.

After the storm passed we walked down slick sidewalks shining in the newly emerged sun and tried to get each other wet by stomping in puddles. Cars hissed by us on the pavement.

"I think Harold Davenport has some paper we can use for the notes," I said. "He has a typewriter, too, but I tried filming something I typed once before and the writing is too small. It's too hard to focus."

"I can just write big," Eduardo said. "I have good handwriting."

The moment we turned onto Upton Street and saw the police car at the far end, near my grandmother's house, I knew it had something to do with me. My stomach fell and I starting to jog down the street. A part of me didn't want to arrive at the end of the street, didn't want to know why the police car was there, didn't want to hear what had to be heard. But still I ran.

"Wait up. What's wrong? Wait!" Eduardo said.

He puffed behind me. I slowed down about fifty feet from my grandmother's house and Eduardo caught up. Several people were on the sidewalk across the street staring. I didn't see any police. I started slowly up the front steps. I heard talking in the kitchen, the sound of my grandmother's voice and someone else's.

Mr. Milo Poong was standing just inside the hallway at the bottom of the stairs to the second floor. He had a paintbrush in his hand. He looked at me with a blank expression when I stepped out of the foyer beside him.

The door to the kitchen was open halfway and I could see a policeman standing next to the table, his hat in his hand. When I entered the kitchen the policeman turned to me in slow motion, it seemed. He was a beefy-faced man, red from the heat and the climb up the stairs. I turned and saw my grandmother standing in the doorway to her bedroom. She was leaning against the doorjamb, one hand held to her forehead. Her eyes behind her glasses were wide.

"Ai, Laura!" she said. "Ai, Dios!"

I moved in a numbed fog and didn't ask any questions when we got in the back of the cruiser and rode to the hospital. The police had come by to bring the news because overdoses were always investigated by the cops.

The morgue was in the basement of the hospital. We went into the hospital through a side entrance and took an old elevator down into the bowels of the building. The cop stayed with us, his hands folded in front of him, impassive. Every once in a while he looked over to me and gave me a grim expression, a slight upturn of pursed lips, a short nod. I guess it was supposed to give me some courage or something.

My grandmother had called several people, relatives on the Cape, a brother of hers who still lived in Boston, but we were alone with the cop in the elevator. I couldn't follow her conversations on the phone; I didn't know what people were going to do. The only one of the boarders who had been at the house was Mr. Milo Poong, whom she had asked to keep an eye on things. We didn't know where Benny was. My grandmother told Mr. Milo Poong to let Benny know what was going on when he got in.

Bright surfaces greeted us when the door to the elevator opened onto the morgue. The floor shone with a dull glow and gurneys and metal chairs in the

hallway sparkled. Sounds echoed brightly off the tiled walls. A place to keep dead people.

The cop took us to a desk at the far end of the hall. My grandmother had been mumbling, talking to herself, praying in Creole since we left the house. As we walked down the hall she put out her hand and laid it on my shoulder. It was heavy, but reassuring. She only kept it there a few seconds.

The cop said something to the woman attendant behind the desk, turned and motioned for my grandmother to come forward. Behind the desk and to one side was a set of swinging double doors, through which orderlies pushed a gurney with something under a sheet on it. I caught a brief glimpse of a wide, high-ceilinged room that looked like a post office, with boxes ranked above each other along each wall. I knew what those were. I had seen them on tv.

They didn't let me go with my grandmother into the room with the bodies. "Let's just you and me sit over here, okay?" the attendant said. "What's your name?" The cop and my grandmother went through the swinging doors. I saw my grandmother make the sign of the cross before she disappeared.

The woman sat next to me on a plastic bench next to the desk. She asked me innocuous questions. A part of my mind listened to her, and another part seemed pervaded by a kind of hum, like the sound of the flourescent lights above us..

I knew I should feel something. I wanted to cry. That's what I should do. But there was nothing there. I saw my mother in my mind and I saw her dead, looking like a statue. Trying to cry about her was like trying to cry about a statue. It was like in church when people knelt before statues of the Virgin Mary. They seemed to feel something when they did it, but I never knew what.

"I'm sure she loved you very much," the woman said.

Maybe she did. Maybe that's why she came by to see me, to watch me in the dark.

I stared at my sneakers, then looked up and suddenly Benny was there at the desk. His hair was wild and dirty-looking, and he was wearing a camouflage jacket whose sleeves came halfway down his hands. Smoke drifted up from one sleeve until he raised the arm to his face and put the cigarette in his mouth. He looked over and saw me.

His eyes were narrow and hard. It seemed like he was angry at me, and for a second I thought that he was somehow thinking what had happened was my fault. He didn't move from where he stood. He took the cigarette from his mouth and dropped it to the floor and ground it out.

"I'm sorry, but you can't just throw your cigarettes on the floor," the attendant said. She rose from the bench and went back behind her desk.

"I'm here to see my mother," Benny said flatly. He gave our mother's name.

"You're her son?"

He glared at her and I thought he was going to curse her, but he only said, sadly, "Yeah, I'm her son."

"Your -- I guess your grandmother, is already here," the woman said. "You can just go right through the door here."

Benny walked to the doors, hesitated for a few seconds, then pushed his way through. From beyond the doors I could hear the sounds of my grandmother crying. The doors swung closed.

The attendant looked like she was going to come back and sit beside me, but another set of orderlies and a sheet-draped gurney arrived from down the hall and she picked up a pen and clipboard and copied down some information. When they had gone, pushing through the doors again, a Puerto Rican family shuffled up to the desk and she began talking to them.

The humming in my head grew louder. I stared at the wall across from me and couldn't think of anything. I saw the whiteness of the wall and it became the color of the sound in my head. White. Nothing.

We all sat in the back of a cab on the way home. The cop's business with us was over when my grandmother identified the body, so we didn't get a return trip in the police car, which suited Benny fine.

"Doesn't have any damned eyes in his head," he said to no one in particular. We jiggled along in the cab and the voice over the two-way radio

droned like some kind of intelligent insect communication. "Says he doesn't see anything," Benny said. My grandmother didn't respond. She just sat between us, shaking her head. "'That ain't my job; let the coroner do his work.' Fuckin' Mick bastard cop. She had bruises all over her head, plain as day." He lit a cigarette and rolled down his window to let out the smoke.

"He said O.D.," my grandmother said.

"O.D., my ass. Maybe she shot up, but that wasn't what killed her."

"Ai, Laura!" my grandmother said. "I told you about that shit! I told you, I told you, but you didn't want to listen. Ai, Nha Mai!"

Benny spoke to her harshly in Creole, but she didn't stop her keening. The hum in my head had faded to a faraway buzz.

"What's going to happen now?" I said, my voice separating itself from the background noise of the buzz. "What are we going to do?"

"I got to -- I got to get the funeral together," my grandmother said flatly. "I got to do all that." She shook her head. "No good! It's all no good! She's gone. Your mama's gone." She put her arm around me and pulled me to her. "Ai, coitad, ai Dios."

"I have to call my father," I said.

She ignored me. She put her hand on her face and pulled down, drawing the loose skin around her mouth into a grimace. "How are we going to pay?"

she said. "Where's the money going to come from? Maybe, maybe Bobby Vieira will help out."

"You must be about as much out of your mind as she was," he said. "You ain't getting nothing out of him. You owe him money! He ain't going to give you the time of day. He's the one who did this!"

I looked out the window as they talked. There was nothing I could say. I wanted them to quit arguing, but I knew they wouldn't listen to me. It seemed they couldn't talk without yelling or saying harsh things to each other. Up ahead I could see heavy machinery in the street and, as we got closer, the burnt-out shell of a three story building. It stood on a corner, an old warehouse or office building. As we got closer I heard the slamming sound I had heard earlier, when I had just gotten to Boston. It was the sound of the machines working on the building, tearing it down, a wrecking ball and a steam shovel working in rhythm with each other. Bricks and charred timbers fell into the hollow center of the building, raising dust and charcoal. This was the site of one of the fires I'd heard. The devastation was complete; I couldn't imagine what the fire itself had looked like.

"But I didn't know," my grandmother said hollowly. "I didn't know it was his money."

"Don't make no difference now," he said. "Nothing makes a difference now. Don't you worry about it." He looked out the window and watched the gray, wet city slide past. "I'm going to take care of things."

We drove by a church and my grandmother crossed herself. It wasn't a Catholic Church, but I didn't say anything. I was thinking about my mother getting in the cab and leaving yesterday, wishing I had said something different to her.

"Stop here," Benny said.

The cab swung over to the side of the road and squeezed against the curb so precipitously that my grandmother cried out. "Where you going?" she asked.

Benny slid out of the cab and poked his head back in. "I gotta see somebody," he said.

"But what --" my grandmother said. The door slammed shut and we were moving again. I turned in my seat and saw Benny standing in the gutter, the gray rain coming down around him like static on tv when the reception is going bad.

It was the first time I had heard silence in my grandmother's kitchen. Harold, Mr. Milo Poong, Spider and Charley Brown, and the Syrian were waiting for us, but no one said anything when we entered. My grandmother

went to the cupboard where she kept the glasses and then to the refrigerator.

She filled her glass with ice and then sat down in her chair, facing the door.

"We're awful sorry, Lil," Harold said.

"Such a beautiful girl," the Syrian said.

Mr. Milo Poong looked at me sadly. He stood near the sink, his hands down by his sides. He slowly clenched and unclenched his fists, but he didn't say anything.

"It's a damn – crying shame," Charlie Brown said. "I never heard such a sad thing."

Spider looked at Charlie Brown as though he were going to tell him to be quiet, but he just shook his head and looked at my grandmother.

My grandmother stared down into her glass, shook the ice around. She laughed sadly. "Ain't nothing in here," she said.

Harold opened her liquor drawer in the cabinet and took out an unopened bottle of gin.

"Here you go, Lil," he said. He set the bottle down in front of her. She nodded at it, but made no movement toward it.

"She was just here," she said. "Yesterday. She was right here talking to me."

I felt invisible. Everyone was looking at my grandmother. I was the one who had lost a mother. I felt a sudden pang of envy and resentment and I didn't

want to be around these people. I slipped around behind Spider and through my grandmother's bedroom to the living room and my bed. I heard their low droning voices from the kitchen, and above it the hum again. It seemed to hang in the air high above me.

She had been right here with me in this room and what had I said to her? What had I said to her those several days? Nothing, just -- things. I should have said more. What, I didn't know. But something that would make me feel better now and not hollow and cold.

Dead. Mother. Two words that had little sense for me. Give me a kiss, she had said. I tried to remember other things she had said, but all that came to me was last night out at the cab. Give me a kiss.

I went out the door that opened onto the hallway and listened to the voices at the far end of the hall. Upstairs it was quiet. I climbed the stairs to the second floor.

I stood outside the room my mother had stayed in and listened. I don't know what I expected to hear. For a second I thought I heard some movement, but the longer I listened the deeper the silence behind that door grew. I heard my breath and my heartbeat. I turned and faced Benny's room.

I crossed the landing to his door and touched it. I knew he couldn't be here, but I called his name anyway and waited. I wanted him to be there; I needed to talk to him. We could talk without there being a crowd of people

trying to find out what had happened and what was going on. We could talk like brothers, just the two of us.

I tried the door, but it was locked. My grandmother had made a key for me to use when I needed to take things up to people in their rooms, or do cleaning. I took that key out and opened Benny's door.

Late afternoon sun through the bent blinds painted the walls and the floor with crooked stripes of light. Swirls of dust motes rose in the light and disappeared. I stepped inside and pulled the door almost closed behind me, listening to the sound of nothing and sniffing the air. Sweat, char, gasoline, pot. All the things I had smelled the other night. He had been burning something. This was what we shared, he and I. The burning. We could talk about that. We could talk about that and about our mother.

But he wasn't here.

This was all Bobby Vieira's fault, Benny said. Bobby had given my mother the heroin and now he had done something else to her. Bruises on her face. He was responsible for her death. I was supposed to do something, my responsibility as a son, but I couldn't even feel what I thought I was supposed to feel. What was I supposed to do?

I checked in the closet, in some boxes he had stacked against the wall, then on the shelf in the closet and in the pockets of his coats. Nothing there. I checked the footlocker at the foot of his bed, but it was locked. I kneeled at the

side of the bed and felt in between the mattress and the box-spring. I smelled the mattress, its earthy, body smell, as I pressed my face against it. Up near the head of the bed I felt something hard and metallic. I hesitated a second, feeling a tingling sensation at the nape of my neck. My fingers slowly felt the pebbled surface of the grip. The metal was cool. I grabbed the pistol with my thumb and forefinger and pulled it out from under the mattress.

I held it flat on my opened palms. The metal was dull in the weak light. I slowly fit my hand around the grip and put my forefinger on the outside of the trigger guard and lifted the pistol, taking aim at imaginary targets around the room. I thought that if I saw Bobby Vieira right now, I could pull the trigger. Then I remembered how I had felt when I saw Benny holding the gun on Bobby Vieira's guy, and knew that I could never really do it. Shooting someone would mark a dividing line between two different kinds of life. There was something terrible on the other side of that line, a dark place, and I knew that I didn't want to go there.

The front door opened, but I didn't think anything about it until I heard someone coming up the steps. Then I put the gun back and smoothed out the sheets and went to the door. I listened and recognized Benny's tread on the stairs. My chest tightened. I stepped out into the hall and closed the door behind me, tugging to get the lock to click. Then I sat down on the floor a few

feet away from his door, pulled my knees up to my chest and wrapped my arms around my legs.

When he saw me, he hesitated before climbing from the top step to the landing. "What are you doing?" he asked.

"Waiting for you."

"What do you want?"

"I don't know."

"Waiting for me, but you don't know why," he said. He crossed the hallway to his door and unlocked it.

"What's going to happen?" I asked. "What's going to happen now?"

"Don't worry about it," he said. "There's nothing you can do about anything that's going to happen or not happen, so don't think about it."

"But I can't," I said. "I can't not think about it."

"You're just going to have to fucking try, okay?" he said loudly.

His voice made me jump. And then I was crying. I hadn't felt it coming.

"You didn't even care about her," I said. "You called her names. You didn't care."

"You don't know nothing, so just shut up, okay?" He leaned toward me and put his finger in my face. I swiped at his hand and missed, hitting the wall.

"And so now you're a little tough guy, is that it?" he said.

"Shut up! You're just mean to everybody, that's all you do! You don't care about anything!"

"You don't even live here. You don't live here, you don't know what's going on. Just shut up and mind your own business. This don't have nothing to do with you!"

He pushed his door open and went into the room. I got up and followed him. He didn't bother to turn the light on, but went over and sat on the bed.

"She was my mother, too," I said. There were no tears now, but my chest heaved and it was hard to breathe. When I tried to talk my voice came out strained and in bursts. "She was -- my mother. She came to -- see me."

"Yeah," Benny said. He stared at the light through the blinds. "She came to see you because she could take a cab and somebody else paid for it. That's how much she cared."

I leaped at him, my arms windmilling as I punched him, and pushed him over backwards on the bed. I cursed and grunted as I hit him, my blows hitting his hands, his forearms, the top of his head. He had his arms up around his face, then he grabbed my arms and flipped me over and I was lying on the floor with my arms behind my back. I kept jerking against him, trying to lift myself up, rocking so hard that I slammed my face down on the floor. He held me down, struggling, until I was weak and out of breath. I lay there, gasping for air on the dusty floor, and all I could see from my position under the window

were the stripes of light on the floor and Benny's feet as he got up and turned to face the bed. I heard the mattress as he lifted it and it fell back in place.

I rolled back over onto my back and sobbed. "I hate you," I said. "I hate your guts."

"Shut up, Pee Wee. You don't even know what hate is. I don't want to find you here when I get back, you hear me?"

"I hate you!"

He lit a cigarette and threw the match on the floor. He was gone before the match stopped smoldering.

I lay there and listened to him go down the stairs. When I stopped sobbing and felt my cheek, it hurt, but I touched it again anyway, running my fingers along the edge of the bruise, tracing out the contours of the pain.

I left the door open behind me and sat on the top of the steps. Footfalls came down the hall and the Syrian appeared briefly at the door and then went outside. Spider and Charlie Brown followed. I descended cautiously .

When I got down to the landing I stopped and listened again to the sounds coming from the kitchen. Harold and Mr. Milo Poong were talking to my grandmother as best they could. They had always been intimidated by her, and now they were awkwardly trying to comfort her. I couldn't hear what they said, only the sounds of their voices.

I sat on the bottom stair in the basement and listened to the dark and felt the coolness. It smelled of mildew and old clothes and ancient dogshit. I had turned on the light at the top, but it only illuminated the stairs. Here at the bottom I sat at the edge of light, trying not to think about anything, willing myself not to be afraid of the dark. I thought about that night on the roof with Benny when we had watched the fire together. He seemed to have liked it as much as I did. And then there was the way he had smelled last night.

I stood up and grabbed the hanging string for the naked bulb that hung from the ceiling. I sought out the corner where I had seen Benny's duffel bag, pushing past discarded cardboard boxes and old, broken furniture. At first I thought I was in the wrong part of the basement, then I realized that I was in the right place, but that the duffel bag wasn't there. There was a bare spot against the wall between two sagging piles of paper grocery bags stuffed with old clothes. The space smelled like gasoline. The bag had been there, but now it was gone. Benny had taken it. He was going to burn something else tonight, someplace else.

I thought I knew what that place was.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

A faded air freshener hanging from the cab's rearview mirror added a faint under-aroma of pine to the odor of old cigarettes and perfume and sweat. I sat in the back against the door, my hands clenched between my knees, rocking, silently urging the cabbie to drive faster, trying to pray, but only able to repeat please, please, please to myself.

"Starlight Club, huh?" the cabbie said. "You're sure that's where you want to go? That's not a place for kids. It's a nightclub." He looked at me quickly in the rearview mirror.

"My mother works there," I said without thinking.

"Never been there, myself," the cabbie said and laughed. "Course, you don't see many Talians there in the first place!"

"Can't you go any faster?"

"Hey, kid, unless you is bleeding back there or about to deliver a baby, this is as fast as I go. I'll have you there in a jiffy. You just relax."

I gritted my teeth and watched buildings slip by us in the dark.

We pulled up in front of the darkened Starlight Club. The street was busy with cars and pedestrians, but the club's neon sign was not lit. The club sat on the corner, a brick building with a small door on one street and a larger, double

door on the main street, Warren Avenue. There were no windows. I looked at my watch. 9:30.

"This what you want?" the cabbie asked.

"Yeah."

"That'll be four eighty, then, unless you want me to wait."

"I don't know."

I fished a five dollar bill out of my pocket and put it in the little tray. I was afraid to get out of the car, but I knew I had to. I pushed the door open and climbed out.

"Stay or go, kid?"

"Go," I said.

"Go it is, then. Close the door, please, and good luck."

I closed the door and the cab heaved off down the street.

Everyone I saw was some shade of brown. White people didn't come down here unless they had a good reason, Harold had told me. On tv, places like this were dangerous to white people. I was as brown as some of the people I saw, so why was I scared?

The alley behind the club was crowded with expensive cars parked two deep. I recognized Bobby Vieira's car parked right next to the back door. I took a few steps into the dark alley and stopped, listening. Music floated on the

air from somewhere. I couldn't tell if it was from the club or one of the cars or someone's opened window down the alley.

Bobby Vieira had killed our mother, Benny said. I imagined his face as he hurt her, seeing him as he was that night in my grandmother's house, and I wanted to hurt him back, wanted Benny to avenge us, to burn down the Starlight Club. But no. Those other buildings he burned didn't have people in them. If he burned the club he would hurt people, perhaps kill them. I couldn't let that happen. Where was he?

At the back of the club there were two sets of steps, one leading up to a small landing and wide double doors, the other, right next to it, leading down to a basement door. I crept to the stairs leading up and climbed them quickly to the landing and listened at the door. I could hear nothing, so I tried the knob, but the door was locked.

I hesitated on the stairs, crouching down when I heard a noise back up the alley. Was it him? I waited, breathing as softly and quietly as I could, expecting a dark figure to slide from the shadows. When no one appeared, I went to the head of the basement stairs and crouched down to look through the windows at foot level. There was a light on, but the windows were grimy. I could see the faint shapes of crates and boxes, tables, broken chairs, piles of other things. I went down the steps and tried this door, too. It didn't budge. Maybe I was too late. Maybe Benny had been here and had already done

something and that's why the club wasn't open. But he had come here to burn the place; if he was here already, why wasn't there a fire? Maybe they did something to him. I should have called the police. That's what I should have done. But when I had come back upstairs and found my grandmother drunk on her bed, the only thing that came to my mind was to get here. I started back up the stairs to the alley and the door opened behind me.

"Who the hell are you?"

I turned back to the door. The guy who was with Bobby Vieira the other night stood with the door opened and one hand inside his coat. "Huh? What the fuck you doing here?"

I hesitated. I saw Bobby slapping my mother.

"You deaf or something?" the man said.

"I – I, " I said.

"You look familiar," he said. "Come here in the light." He grabbed me by the arm and pulled me into the club. "You're the kid from that house the other night." His grip tightened on my arm. I tried to pull free, but his hand completely encircled my upper arm and held so tight I could feel my pulse thudding against his fingers. "What the hell's going on?"

"Nothing," I said, trying to pull away. "You're hurting my arm, man."

"Nothing, my ass. You don't show up here at night for nothing. Now you're going to tell me what's going on or I'm gonna kick your little ass." He yanked

me further into the club and closed the door. I wanted to run but I didn't know where. He blocked the door and when I looked behind me I saw nothing but boxes and furniture. "You best not try to run," he said, "cuz if you make me have to catch you I'm really gonna be on your ass. Now tell me what you're doing here."

"I came to see Bobby," I lied. "I have to talk to him. I can't tell anybody else but him."

"Why the fuck not?"

"I – I can't tell you."

"You better if you know what's good for you," he said.

I heard footsteps and turned to see another man standing behind me. I was surprised because he was white, a short, slender man with long hair pulled back in a ponytail. He was wearing dress pants and suspenders with a t-shirt.

"What's up?"

"Little man here says he gots to talk to Bobby," Del said.

"He ain't got no time for no kid," the white guy said. "What you doing here? This ain't no place to be fucking around with no kid games."

"It's important," I said.

"Shit, ain't nothing not important," the white guy said. "Just some things more important than others."

Del pushed me toward the white guy, then leaned toward him and whispered to him..

"Let's take him upstairs then," the white guy said.

"Move," Del told me.

We crossed the floor to the stairs on the far side of the room. From above I heard footfalls and conversation, the occasional sound of a trumpet. I cut my eyes to either side, glancing into the shadows. Was Benny there? Did he see me? I waited for something to happen, but we got to the stairs and I started climbing.

The lights were on in the club and people were doing the same kinds of things we did at the China Star, vacuuming the rug, cleaning tables, filling salt and pepper shakers. At one end of the club was the stage a band was setting up and tuning their instruments on the slightly raised stage, filling the air with a confusion of horns and drums and piano.

Tables lined either side of the dance floor, and behind the tables on the right was a bar; on the left the double doors of a kitchen swung in and out as people carried trays and boxes to and from the hall. No one paid us any attention as we walked the length of the club and started up a set of stairs.

On the second floor a hallway ran to the left and right with doors opening off to either side. A door flew open at the far end of the hall on the right and a

Black couple came out of a room and walked toward us hurriedly, talking in angry tones. When they reached us the woman scowled.

"And a good evening to you, too," Del said.

"Niggah, kiss my ass," the woman said, pushing past us to the stairs.

"Baby, I would, but that ass of yours is big and I ain't got all night!"

All three men laughed at that and the woman paused on the top of the stairs to look back at them angrily. The man who was walking with her quickly stifled his laughter and shook his head disapprovingly. He joined her on the steps and they went down together.

The white guy pointed down the hallway to the left and gave me a slight nudge in the shoulder.

"Got that boy whupped!" Del said.

"Hey, little man, in here," the white guy said. I had just passed the third door on the right. The man put his hand on my shoulder and stopped me. He opened the door and gave me a stronger push into a nondescript room with a couple of well-worn stuffed chairs and a sofa. The carpet was worn through to threads and cords in the middle of the floor. At the other end of the room there was a single window with a shade pulled down.

"You wait in here," he said, closing the door, "and don't fucking move."

The door closed and I blew out a long breath. My hands were shaking. I went to the window and pulled the shade up. The view overlooked Warren

Avenue, the front of the club. I thought of climbing out the window, but there was no ledge. I'd have to jump. Could I make it? I tried the window but it was stuck fast with paint. I tried again, straining at the frame until my arms trembled, but the window didn't budge.

"Shit. Shitshitshit."

I pulled the shade back down and went over to the sofa. What would I tell Bobby Vieira if they came and got me? I couldn't tell him about Benny. No. He would do something to him if I did, maybe kill him. He might even kill me. I didn't know what lie I would tell. I couldn't think. I had to get out of there, I had to be calm like Benny was that time when he faced down Vieira and Del. I crossed the room and pressed my ear to the door. Nothing. I could just slip out and find my way downstairs.

I held my breath and counted to get my nerve up. On fifty I opened the door and stepped out into the hallway, motionless and silent. We had come from the right end of the hall. I started that way slowly, trying to tiptoe. I was almost to the end when I heard voices coming up the stairs. I turned and opened the door nearest me and slipped in.

Several women were sitting in chairs, smoking cigarettes and talking. Two others sat doing their makeup at makeup tables. They were all dressed in shiny, expensive-looking dresses, with their hair done up. They looked at me with the minimum of interest.

"Hey, sugar," one of women in the chairs said.

"You're a cutie," said the woman next to her. "What can we do for you, little man?"

"I'm -- I'm looking for Bobby," I said.

"Ain't we all looking for Bobby," the first one said dreamily.

The others laughed, except for one woman, who just stared at me. "You look familiar," she said.

"My mother," I said. "She used to work here."

"Who's your mama?"

"Laura, Laura Santos."

"Hmmpf," one of them said.

"I knew you were familiar from somewhere," the woman who had been staring at me said. "She used to show us pictures of you, didn't she?"

"Mmm hmmm," one of the women said.

"Where'd she go?"

"She's dead," I said slowly..

The women were silent for a second. They turned to face me.

"Dead?" one of the women at the makeup table said, her voice rising.

"What you mean, dead? Bobby just said she went to Buffalo last night."

"Yeah, to check on his club up there."

The first woman got to her feet and crossed the room to me.

"What are you talking about, boy?" she said. "Who told you this?"

I backed up a step. They were all looking at me intently. One of them was smirking.

"The police," I said. "I went to the hospital. Me and my grandmother. My grandmother saw her."

"Lord have mercy," one of the women said.

"It was that shit, is what it was," another woman said.

"Told her about messing with that heroin, DeRonda, didn't you?"

"When did this happen?" DeRonda said.

"Last night, I think. I don't know. The police came today."

The woman turned and looked at the others in the room. The one woman who had smirked calmly lit a cigarette and blew smoke up at the ceiling. The others just stared back at DeRonda.

"Why'd he go and tell us about Buffalo?" DeRonda asked.

"Maybe we don't need to know," one of the women at the makeup table said. "Maybe we don't need to know nothing about it."

"Mm hmm," said the smirking woman.

"I'm going to find out," DeRonda said. "Come on." She turned to me and motioned to the door.

"Girl, you best just leave things be that don't concern you," the smirking woman said.

"It does concern me. She was my friend."

"And she was Bobby's woman, so what's that mean?"

"I don't know nothing about that, but I'm going to find out," DeRonda said.

She reached behind me, opened the door and we went out into the hall. When the door closed the women were silent for a heartbeat, then began talking quickly, lowly.

"What's your name?" the woman asked me.

"Rory. My last name is Chen."

"That's right. She told me something about your Daddy being Chinese.

My name's DeRonda."

DeRonda looked like she belonged to a singing group like the Supremes. She was dressed in a tight, glittery dress and her hair was done up in a beehive. She had a narrow, pretty face with a small nose and broad cheekbones and wore pale pink lipstick.

"I only just saw her the other day," I said. "I didn't see her before that for years. The last time was when I was a kid."

DeRonda put her hand on my head and then pulled me close, hugging me. I could feel the heat of her body through her dress. She was about the same size as my mother. I felt a sudden confusion as she held me to her. I hugged her back and felt an ache in the middle of me.

"Come on," she said. "Let's find Bobby, you poor thing."

As she led me to the stairs I could hear the sound of a crowd downstairs now, the faint murmur of voices, occasionally laughter. We descended the steps and stood for a second behind a door with a one-way glass in it. I was trying to orient myself and remember which way I would have to go if I decided to run. DeRonda leaned up close to the glass and watched something, then pulled the door open.

The darkened club was filling with people, couples sitting at tables, men and women milling near the entrance or sitting on stools at the long bar. I had never been in a nightclub before, had never seen the kinds of fancy suits and outfits these people were wearing. Several of the men were wearing wide colorful hats and among those who were bare-headed I saw some of the largest Afros I'd ever seen. Some kids at school had started wearing platform shoes this year. Here at the club it seemed to be the style among both the men and the women. I felt dwarfed by everyone as we walked along the edge of the dining room. The band was no longer on the stage at the far end of the club, but music was still playing, coming over speakers hanging from the ceiling near the dancefloor. Waitresses dressed in short skirts threaded their way among the close-set tables carrying trays of drinks. The air was thick with loud laughter, loud conversations, chairs scraping the floor, occasionally the front door being opened and traffic going by in the night.

DeRonda stopped a passing waitress and shouted something in her ear over the noise. The waitress made a motion with her head toward the kitchen. DeRonda turned to me.

"You wait right here," she said. "Anybody asks what you're doing, you just tell them I said it was alright." She moved across the floor toward the double kitchen doors. When she disappeared through the doors I turned and looked back out over the club. I recognized somebody sitting at a small table across the dining area from the kitchen. It was Coop. He looked surprised to see me, but then he smiled broadly, motioning with his good hand for me to come over to his table. When I hesitated, he gestured again, vigorously.

"What you doing here, little man?" he asked. "Sit down."

"I'm supposed to wait for somebody."

"Well, you can wait right here. Go on, sit down, sit down."

I sat down in the chair opposite him. He smiled and tapped out a rhythm on the table top with his good hand. "So, what you doing here? Here to see somebody? That's something -- little kid like you coming to see somebody in a nightclub. And the Starlight Club at that! Heh heh." He took a quick drink from the bottle of beer in front of him. "Must be a lady, right? Little man got hooked up with a lady!" He tapped his hand on the table again, then pulled back the sleeve on his bad arm and looked at the watch he wore strapped to his

prothesis just above the hook. I looked over my shoulder at the kitchen doors. No sign of DeRonda or Bobby.

Coop set his beer bottle down on the table with a clink. I turned back to face him. "You want something?" he said. "If you were older, I'd buy you a beer. Yeah, but can't do that, right? You want something?"

"I don't know. A coke, I guess."

"All right. One coke, one malt liquor!" He motioned a waitress over and ordered our drinks. "Hey, you know, I'm real sorry about your mother, little man. Yeah, Benny told me all about it." He shook his head. "Crying shame. That heroin is bad news. I'm real sorry."

"He said that's not how she died." I looked over my shoulder again. "Benny said she didn't die of heroin."

"Not heroin? That's what he told me. Told me it was an overdose."

"He said Bobby Vieira did it. He's coming here to -- to do something tonight," I said. "I think he's going to burn this place down. He took his stuff with him. He had this bag with a gas can in it in the basement, but now it's gone."

Coop laughed loudly and drank some beer. "That's what you think? Man, that boy's messed up right now. Came to my crib, got himself high as a kite on some reefer and wine and just fell out. He ain't burning nothing down tonight, 'less it's my room and then the boy's in real trouble."

"In your room? But he took all his stuff, his duffel bag and the gun."

"I don't know about no duffel bag, but he came over to my pad. He was packing some heat, but he put it out on the table when we started hitting that bone and he went down without picking it back up."

I looked at my coke and felt suddenly stupid. Benny was at Coop's, high and passed out. He had probably put the duffel bag someplace else in the basement before he went over to Coop's. There were plenty of places in the basement to put stuff like that.

"Hey, show's about to start," Coop said.

He motioned toward the stage. I turned and saw an older man standing in front of a microphone in the glare of a spotlight.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, please welcome to the Starlight Club, the Tony Needham Jazz Combo!"

The man started clapping and the band came onstage, five men in dark suits and sunglasses.

"Hey, why don't you slide your chair over on this side so you can see the show?" Coop asked, looking over my shoulder as he spoke. This was my chance. I could slip out while the music was playing. The lights had dimmed even more. No one would pay me any attention.

"Come on," Coop said.

"I think maybe I should just go," I said.

"Come here, man, come on. You ain't even touched your coke yet."

I sighed and moved my chair over to his side of the table and pulled my coke across to me.

"There you go. Right here."

He tugged my chair even closer so that our shoulders were almost touching.

"That's right," he said. "You're in a club, you might as well enjoy the show."

Coop jiggled his feet and I felt his hook bounce off his lap onto my leg, where it rested heavy and cold for a second. I shifted nervously in my seat and he pulled it back onto his own lap.

The band played a langorous song that seemed to have no melody. I suddenly was tired, my eyes feeling heavy. The doors to the kitchen opened and DeRonda came out and started across the floor to where she had left me. She looked around, and when she saw me, made her way over to us.

"What are you doing?" she asked, smiling uncertainly.

I didn't know what to say. Coop laughed and put his hook on my shoulder.

"Hey-hey, fine sister, how are you tonight?" he said. "This is my little friend here. Me and his brother are tight. We were both over in the war, know what I mean? Yeah, I saw the little brother wandering around here and told him to come on over so I could look out for him."

"Mm hmm," she said, crossing her arms across her chest. "Well, he was with me. You had something you wanted to tell Bobby, didn't you, baby?"

"I –"

Coop pressed down with his hook, digging into the flesh just behind my collar bone. I winced and he almost immediately eased the pressure.

"What, baby?" DeRonda said.

"I – I don't think I want to talk to him, I guess."

She put a hand on her hip and tilted to her head to one side.

"Now what's going on?"

"Hey, baby, ain't nothing going on but the rent," Coop said. "Like I said, I seen my little friend here and I'm looking out for him. Now maybe he had something on his mind when he come in here, but it seem like he don't any more. Am I right?"

He looked at me and jostled me, digging in with the hook again. The pain took my breath away. It felt as though he were digging down into the center of me.

"What are you doing to that child?" DeRonda asked.

The band stopped playing and the crowd applauded loudly. Coop dug his hook into me harder and I yelped.

"What now, honey?" Coop said, leaning toward her and cupping his good hand behind his ear.

His coat fell open across his lap and I saw DeRonda look down. She stared at something inside his coat for a second too long and her eyes widened.

"What?" Coop asked again.

"Nothing," DeRonda said. "I'll be right back. You just enjoy the show."

Coop watched her go, tapping on my collarbone with his hook.

"Motherfucker. Shit. Shit."

"Stop it," I said. "That hurts."

He pulled the hook off for a second, but it was to check his watch. He swore again and let the hook rest on me again. "You just keep sitting here with me," he said.

The trumpet player, a small thin man, walked slowly to the front of the stage and marked time as the band played the opening bars of the next song. When he put the trumpet to his lips and started playing he filled the air with a long, high wailing note that seemed to sweep above our heads like a searchlight.

"Shit," Coop said.

I turned back around and followed his eyes. DeRonda was on the other side of the room talking to the two men who had brought me into the club from the alley. She spoke to them with her back to us, jerking her head toward her shoulder. The men cast an occasional glance in our direction.

Coop was saying something to me but I couldn't hear it over the sound of the trumpet. He reached inside his coat and pulled something out and set it on the chair between his legs. "— say go, you go," he said to me, facing DeRonda and the men.

"Go where? What?"

"Go out the door," he said.

I started to move in the chair, but he clamped down with the hook.

"Not yet," he said.

He reached inside his coat again and this time I saw what he had, a dark, cylindrical can about two-thirds the size of a soda can and a small pistol.

"Motherfucker," he said.

I looked and saw the two guys walking toward us. Coop checked his watch again.

"Well, shit," he said.

He took his arm off my shoulder and fumbled with one of the cans in his lap. Something metallic clanged on the floor. I smelled something acrid.

"Go on, kid," Coop said. "Go go go!"

I stood up and the chair fell over behind me. Smoke was curling out from underneath our table. Coop pulled at the other can and then lobbed it out onto the dancefloor, where a few couples were swaying to the music. The can hit

the floor with a clank and skittered across the floor, shooting out smoke and among the dancers' ankles.

I backed into the table behind me and heard drinks fall over. A woman yelled and a man told me to watch the fuck where I was going.

Then people began shouting "Fire!" and suddenly erupted from all over the club. Someone pushed me from behind, snapping my head back. I stumbled forward onto our table and rode over top of it to the floor, bringing it down with me. My head hit something hard and I couldn't breathe. Coop was cursing at the top of his lungs. I heard a popping sound and more screams. Feet scrambled past me. I crawled under a nearby table that was still standing.

I held tight to the table's leg as glasses smashed around me and chairs and tables splintered. Bodies slammed to the floor, rolled over tables and each other, then scrambled back up. The shuffle of shoes, the click-click of high heels sounded from everywhere. Then I heard the popping again and more screaming. No one was talking, not even to shout. People were grunting, yelling, crying, but no one was saying anything, not even "Fire!" anymore.

I tried to crawl out from under the table, but someone stepped on my hands and then stood there. I yelled, but I couldn't hear my own voice above the sound of turmoil.

When the person finally moved, I wrapped my arms around the leg of the table. My fingers ached when I tried to close my hands. Broken, I thought; the bones in my hand were broken. I held on to the leg and cried and waited to die.

I realized I could hear myself crying and understood that the people were gone. I crawled out from under the table on throbbing hands. The club was filled with a dense smoke that burned my throat and sent me into a coughing fit. I heard voices, but they came from far away, from outside. I was alone. I crawled toward the voices.

Outside the street was full of people. Traffic had been stopped in the intersection by the hundreds who had poured out of the club. Women were crying, many of them hobbling around in only one shoe. Dazed faces stared at the building. I rubbed smoke from my eyes and started for the street. A hand grabbed me roughly.

"What are you doing here?" Bobby Vieira pulled me out into the street. His suit coat and shirt were ripped.

"Nothing!"

He shook me by my collar. "Don't lie! Who was that? Who set fire to the club?"

He put his face close to mine and I wondered if this is what he looked like when he had hurt my mother. Was this what she saw before she died?

"It's not on fire," I said.

"Who was it!"

"It's only smoke," I said. "It's just smoke! He had smoke grenades."

"Quit fucking around!"

"Bobby, don't hurt him," DeRonda said.

She put herself between us, pulling Bobby's hands off me, but he shoved her aside and grabbed my shirt with both hands. "Why'd you come here? What are you doing?"

"I came to -- I came to stop him."

"Stop him? Huh? Stop him? What the fuck is that?" He pointed to the club and shook me. "Huh? Stop him? Why didn't you *tell me* then?"

"Coop told me he wasn't here. He told me Benny didn't come."

"Who?"

"The guy. Coop. The guy with the smoke grenades."

"Smoke -- what are you talking about?"

Bobby turned and yelled for Del to check out the club and see if it was only smoke. He still held me just below the throat, his knuckles pressing into my adam's apple. "Come on." He kept one hand knotted in my shirt and dragged me back toward the building. DeRonda tried again to get in between us. Bobby swung at her with his open hand. She ducked the blow, but lost her balance and slipped on the sidewalk. "This don't make no fucking sense!" he

said. He stood with me on the sidewalk while two of his men cautiously entered the club.

"He had two of them," I said. "Two smoke grenades."

"What was Benny going to do?" Bobby asked. "What was that sonofabitch going to do?"

"Burn it," I said.

"So who was the clown with the grenades?"

"A friend of his," I said.

"Hey, Bobby." Del stood in the doorway, holding a smoke grenade in a folded up napkin. "Smoke grenade," the man said. "Army issue."

"Smoke grenade," Bobby said. "Motherfucker! Check the club! That smoke was just a diversion. Check the club! He's probably ripping us off."

The man disappeared back in the club. Bobby turned and yelled for the other men who worked in the club to go back in. "Come on," he said, tugging at my shirt. "We'll give that cocksucker a surprise."

The smoke still hung heavy in the club, but it wasn't hot, and there was no sound of fire. Bobby's men searched the building, the sound of their shoes echoing sharply in the emptiness. We stood just inside the front doors and listened to them as they climbed the stairs and went room to room upstairs. Bobby pulled me over to the small cubicle where people paid the cover charge. The cubicle had a plexiglass front, a shelf where the cash register sat and a

small stool. There wasn't room for both of us in the cubicle so he let go of my collar and stepped inside to open the register and check the cash drawer. The smoke was still heavy and stinging. My eyes teared and I began coughing again.

I backed away from the cubicle as Bobby popped open the register. I was going to turn and run through the front doors when I smelled the gasoline, faint at first, then unmistakable and heavy. Benny was here. The basement.

I ran back into the dining area and across the dancefloor to the open basement door. I stopped there. "Benny?" I said, trying not to yell. "Benny?" I thought I heard movement in the basement. Bobby yelled something from the foyer and I started down the stairs.

The lights were all on. I heard the sound of sloshing gas and footsteps from over near the door.

"Benny?" The sounds stopped. I started across the floor, weaving around the furniture and boxes. "Benny, it's me, Rory. They're coming." I stepped around a stack of chairs and there he was, ten feet away near the stairs leading to the alley. The gasoline can was on the floor near the stairs. He held something in his hand.

"What the fuck – what the hell are you doing here?" he said. He looked confused. "How did you get here?"

"Don't do it, Benny," I said. "Please, don't burn it down."

"Get out, get out of here. You can't stop nothing now. Get out!"

The odor of the gasoline enveloped me, the smell of all those days in Ryan's garage, the smell of that day when I let my house get burned. But Benny had used more gas than we ever had. Just one match, I knew, and everything would burn. My skin could already feel the heat. I wanted to run but I stood there.

"Come on, Benny, please. Please. They'll find you, they know. I told them."

He closed his eyes tight and made a sound deep in his chest and in his throat, a groan. "Too late," he said, his eyes still closed. "It's too late, Pee Wee. Too late." He opened his eyes and glared at me. "Go on, you little shit. Get out of here. Get the fuck out of here!" He opened his hand to show me the box of matches. He pulled a match out. "I'm not stopping because of you, you understand? Now go! Go on! Go!"

We stood there and stared at each other without speaking. Then a strange look passed over his face, a smile and something else I couldn't read. It was gone quickly. He held a match to the scratchboard. "Go," he mouthed silently.

I backed toward the stairs, watching him. He just stared at me. I bumped into a table and almost fell, then turned and ran to the stairs. I reached the top just as Bobby Vieira appeared in the doorway with Del behind him. I saw their guns.

"He's down there, isn't he?" Vieira yelled.

"Benny, he's coming!"

Bobby snapped his arm toward me. I heard a distinct clunk on my head, felt something hard and sharp just above my cheekbone. My teeth snapped together and the world tilted ninety degrees and things went dim. I lay on my side on the landing and felt something wet in my eyes and down the side of my face. My mouth tasted coppery. I tried to stand up, but only made a halfhearted attempt. I knew that I was hurt but I had to get out of there. I managed to get up on my knees and my elbows, but I could barely raise my forehead off the floor. From far away I heard Bobby Vieira yelling something, then I heard the sound of shots and, above that, the unmistakable whooshing of a large fire exploding to life. Someone was screaming.

"Benny!"

I started crawling back down the stairs, but only got halfway when the first billow of dark smoke roiled up and enveloped me. I caught my breath just in time and turned back, feeling the heat rising behind me as the fire roared and the screaming went on. I scrambled up into the club and tried to stand. My knees buckled and I went back down on all fours. My eyesight constricted to a narrow tunnel and then the tunnel disappeared into darkness. The world went away.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

I opened my eyes to a darkened room. At first I thought I was on the sofa in my grandmother's house, but it was too cool in the room and it didn't smell familiar. And the mattress beneath me was not rounded like the sofa's cushions, but flat and firm. I shifted my eyes to the side and saw a thin slice of light through some curtains to my right. Then I knew that I was somewhere else because I always slept on the sofa with my right side to the back of the sofa. Someone was whispering. I turned my head toward the sound of the voice and a sharp pain on the side of my head made me groan.

"Is he awake?" someone said.

"Rory?" my grandmother said softly.

Her voice came from the other side of the room.

"Yeah?"

"How you feel?"

"Okay. My head hurts. Where am I?"

"The hospital. You're going to be okay."

I couldn't remember why I should be in the hospital. I moved my head gingerly from side to side; whatever I did caused the pain to blossom from somewhere behind my eyes. Once the pain started, the only thing I could do

was wait. The pain throbbed with my pulse, became steadily weaker, disappeared.

"Rory?"

"Yeah?"

"I thought you went back to sleep."

"My head was hurting."

"We can get the nurse to bring you some medicine."

"Okay."

My grandmother whispered to someone else in the room and I heard the other person get up and open the door. The light from the hallway triggered the pain again. I clenched my eyes tight but it was too late. I counted eighty throbs until the pain disappeared. A wave of nausea rose in my stomach and then slowly subsided. I tried to remember what could have happened to put me in the hospital, but nothing came to me.

"What happened?" I asked.

"You don't remember?" my grandmother said.

I thought again. "No."

I heard the door opening and closed my eyes before the light flashed in on me. Someone came to my bedside and put a hand on my shoulder.

"How are we doing?" a woman's voice asked.

"My head hurts a lot."

"Does the light hurt it?"

"Yeah."

"Okay, just keep your eyes shut while I turn on the light over the bed. I have to give you your medicine. It'll help with the pain."

I closed my eyes tight and swallowed the large pill she gave me.

"Where's my father?" I asked.

"I don't know, sweetheart. Let me check for you. Okay, I'm going to turn the light off so you can open your eyes again."

I waited a few seconds just to be safe. When I opened my eyes the room was darkened again and felt empty.

"Nana?"

There was no one there. I closed my eyes and waited and before long fell back asleep.

I could see the light through my eyelids and was afraid that the pain would throb through my head again when I opened my eyes, so I shielded my face with my hand and blinked several times. The pain was bearable. I opened my eyes behind my hand and then slowly moved my hand away. The curtains were open a little wider; a broad swath of light angled across the room.

"How you sleep?" my grandmother asked.

I could see her this time in her chair against the wall. She was small in the poor light.

"Okay," I said. "My head doesn't hurt that much anymore."

"Got a concussion, the doctor said. Cracked cheek bone."

I had never heard of anyone breaking their cheek bone before. I was curious to touch my face, but afraid. I remembered something hitting me in the face. I tried to remember where that had happened. Fire. There had been a fire.

"How you doing, kid?"

I lifted my head and saw my father sitting at the foot of the bed. He looked tired and worried. I started crying, but I didn't know why. I knew I was glad to see him, so I didn't know what the tears were for.

"Hey, it's going to be okay. It's going to be all right."

"I'm sorry," I said and kept repeating it.

"Why? Sorry about what? You didn't do anything."

I knew there was something I had done or hadn't done, but I couldn't remember. I just knew I was hurt and I felt guilty.

"You remember what happened?" my grandmother said.

"Not really."

"Your mother's friend brought you here," she said. "DeRonda."

I remembered the woman I had met at the Starlight. I couldn't remember her face, but I remembered the name.

"Yeah," I said.

"She said you went there to see Bobby Vieira, said you got him mad saying things about your mother and that he hit you."

Something was wrong in what she said, but I couldn't figure out what.

"The fire," I said.

"That was later," my grandmother said. "That was after she brought you to the hospital. Fire broke out."

I thought about the fire for a few seconds, the people running everywhere, the noise and smoke.

"Benny," I said.

"What about Benny?"

"Where is he?"

"I don't know," she said. "*Here or there*. He's around somewhere. He's always coming and going."

"He was there at the club."

"You see him?"

"I -- I can't remember exactly."

"Shush, then. He was at the house with me." She took a cigarette out of her purse and put it in her mouth but she didn't light it. "Him and me were talking."

"You hungry?" my father asked.

"Yeah, I guess."

"It's past lunchtime, but maybe we can bring you something from McDonalds."

I remembered something.

"My mother's dead," I said.

"I know, kid," he said. "I'm sorry." He came up to the head of the bed and touched my shoulder, patted it.

I nodded and then I closed my eyes and drifted away, dreaming of nothing.

Things came back to me slowly over the next two days. I remembered details of the fire, could see Benny in the basement, could hear the flames. I kept asking my grandmother and my father questions and finally they told me everything they knew. The Starlight Club had burned completely, collapsing into the basement. The site was still too hot to clean up, so no one knew if anybody had been killed, but people had seen Bobby and Del and me go into the building, and I was the only one who came out, so they assumed that they

were dead. No one said anything about seeing Benny come out of the club, so I figured that he, too, was down there, buried under burned rubble. But I didn't want to believe it.

The doctors didn't want me to go to the funeral, but I pleaded with my father and he promised them he'd take good care of me. They relented, but made us swear that I wouldn't stay on my feet for more than a half hour or so at a time, and that I would get back to the hospital and in my bed within six hours.

The cemetery in Onset was divided in two, the Protestant section on the left side of the main road, the Catholic on the right. All of our people were buried on the right hand side, my grandmother said, except for her sister Jenny, who converted to Protestantism back in the 1920s and died soon afterward. There must have been more Catholics around than Protestants, because the Catholic side was built around a lake that had geese on it and weeping willows growing down by the water's edge. The Protestant side looked out over the highway and the cranberry bogs beyond it.

I was unsteady on my feet, and because of the bandage on my head, I could only see out of my left eye and had to keep turning my head to see the other half of the world. Turning my head was painful. I let that side be empty and dark.

When we arrived at the plot and the pallbearers pulled the coffin out of the hearse and set it on the metal frame inside the grave, I didn't feel anything. People around me were crying and praying. I watched them and felt envious of their grief. The priest was late getting to the grave site. Women I didn't know came up to me and hugged me gently. Men put their hands on my shoulder and shook their heads, said how sorry they were.

My grandmother had not wanted me to go the funeral home to see my mother, but my father thought going might help me. I got there right at the very end, as they were preparing to take her to the church for the funeral. She looked different to me, like she had put on weight, and she was darker, too. She had on diamond earrings and was holding a rose in her hands. I knelt at the bar in front of the coffin, but no prayers came to me. I closed my eyes. I tried to see her alive. What I saw was her dark form twisting on the bed in her room. Then my father put his hand on my shoulder and I made the sign of the cross and kissed her quickly on her cool cheek. I went out to the funeral home limousine and lay down for the ride to the church.

The priest finally arrived at the cemetery. He was an old white guy with bushy eyebrows and peeling, red skin. He rasped about life after death, and we said things back to him that had been printed on a piece of paper we had all been given. My father started crying in the middle of one of the prayers. He didn't make any noise as he cried. I could just see his shoulders hitching up. I

had no tears in me, I just couldn't summon them even though I knew I should, and so it made me feel guilty to see him cry and surprised. I had never seen him do that before and haven't since. I thought I should do something to make him feel better, to help him, I guess, so I tried to reach out and take his hand, but my depth perception was off and I only managed to brush his sleeve. He clenched his hands in front of him and stared at his feet.

When it was time I stepped forward with a rose someone had handed me and put it on the coffin. Then the coffin was lowered into the ground and the priest said a few more things and we all said "Amen" and it was time to go. My father walked me over to the edge of the lake and we watched the geese gliding on the water for a few minutes. My mother would like being here, he said. She would like the geese. I didn't know what to say about that, so I just nodded.

We got back in the limousine and drove to a large house in Onset where Juanita, one of my grandmother's sisters, still lived. The narrow street was clogged with cars. The driver pulled up in front of the house and let us out. My father walked beside me to the white picket fence and fumbled with the catch on the gate. Four men sat on the porch on folding chairs with styrofoam bowls of food on their laps and plastic cups on the floor beside them. One of them said something and the other three erupted in laughter, stomping their feet and

leaning back in their chairs. One of them started coughing and had to put his food down and grab a handkerchief from his pocket to hold to his face.

"Why are they laughing?" I asked.

"People are like that at funerals sometimes," my father said.

I glared at the men as we mounted the porch. One of them happened to be looking at me, but my glare must not have been very impressive because he smiled at me and raised an eyebrow.

The house was a dense confusion of people, noise, heat and the aromas of food. A large woman standing just inside the door was yelling toward the rear of the house. Sweat poured down her face. "I'm going to get more linguica!" she said. Someone answered her and she bustled past me. A stifling wave of heat washed over me. She smelled of a confusing mixture of foods and strong perfume. "How are you, sweetheart?" she said to my father. "I'm so sorry."

Once again I had to run the gauntlet of hugs and pats on the shoulder. More so even than the day of the picnic, I was amazed at all the different colors of the Cape Verdeans I met. Many of the people knew my father and were surprised to see him after so long. I wandered through the house behind him, listening to him tell the story of what we had been doing over the years.

An older woman, older than my grandmother by a few years at least, hobbled up to my father, gripping a cane in one hand and holding onto the arm

of a young woman with the other. She wore an old-fashioned print dress and had a shawl draped over her shoulders. Her face was smooth around the eyes and mouth, but her skin sagged under her jaws, and she had, I could plainly see, a dark line of hair on her upper lip. She blinked at my father with wet eyes.

"You don't remember me?" she asked him.

"Sure, sure," my father said, but I knew from his voice that he didn't. It was the voice he often used in the restaurant when he was trying to buy a few seconds so he could remember someone's name or where he knew them from. The woman smiled sadly. "Juanita," my father said suddenly. "Sure, I remember." She released the arm of the woman next to her and held her hand out. My father leaned toward her and gave her a hug and she said something in his ear and kissed him on the cheek. "I know," my father said. "Thank you." He turned and beckoned for me to come closer. "This is your aunt Juanita," he said.

The old woman reached out and touched my face as I drew closer and smiled that sad smile again. "I know you don't remember me," she said. "You were just a little, *little* boy, just a baby. You and your mother, God rest her soul, lived with me and my Jimmy."

I knew that this was true from what my father had told me about the years before he met my mother. I glanced around the room as though doing so would bring back some memory. Instead I saw my grandmother coming

toward us, moving slower than she usually did, a bewildered expression on her face. I looked back at Juanita and saw the resemblance now. My grandmother would look like her in a few years, maybe even have a cane. She would no longer be ordering her tenants around at 39 Upton Street, or arguing with Benny. She would just be an old woman in a house of strangers. The thought made me sad.

My grandmother spoke in Creole and put her hand on my shoulder. I thought she was talking to me, but she was nodding to Juanita. Juanita answered her and made a strange sound, a kind of moaning cry, and then she hugged my grandmother, rocking from side to side. My grandmother started crying, too, her shoulders heaving. The woman who had been helping Juanita stepped up and supported them both. I was about to step back from them when my grandmother lifted her head up from her sister's shoulder and reached out for me. I moved toward her, uncertain what she wanted. She pulled me in close so that I was pressed against them. My arm went around my grandmother's shoulder and I hugged her back. I could feel her body trembling.

At one point I fell asleep in a chair in the living room, listening to their various voices, Creole and English and broken English blending together. I drifted on the gentle waves of those voices, paying no attention to what they

were talking about, just feeling the rhythm of how they spoke. Then someone said "Benny," as though he had just walked into the room and they were greeting him, and I opened my eyes.

But he wasn't there. I got up and went looking for him.

I approached each room certain that I would hear his voice, that I would see him once I got there. I searched the whole house.

"What's a matter, baby?" someone said.

It was DeRonda. I had gone out on the back porch and was looking at the people standing around in the backyard eating from paper plates, drinking beer, smoking cigarettes. She was standing in the doorway, holding a plastic cup of beer.

"I'm looking for somebody," I said.

She came out on the porch and smoothed my hair with her hand. "Yeah?" she said. "Who you looking for?"

"Benny. My brother."

"He's not here."

"I know, but where is he?" I knew what one possibility was, but I didn't want to say it, didn't want to believe it.

"Nobody knows. After the fire, they couldn't find him."

"He did it," I said. "I remember now."

"Hush. It ain't going to do no good to talk about that. That's all finished. What happened, happened."

I watched the people out in the yard, afraid to say anything else, preferring to not know. Some of the people started laughing and it made me angry.

"What's going to happen?" I asked.

"I don't know. We'll just have to wait and see."

The laughing people looked over at me and must have seen me scowling at them. They turned away and spoke quietly.

"I'm going back to California," I said.

"Your daddy will take care of you," she said. "He's a good man."

"But what's going to happen about Benny?"

"You have anything to eat?" she asked. "I'll bet you're hungry."

"I don't know."

"Come on." She started walking back toward the house and I followed her.

"They've got all kinds of that Portuguese food."

"Cape Verdean," I said. "It's Cape Verdean food."

"Yeah," she said. "That's what your mama was, wasn't it?"

"I didn't know that until this summer. I always just thought I was Portuguese, but it's African and Portuguese."

"It's a nice mixture," she said, smiling.

"Thanks," I said. I felt myself get warm.

"Maybe we can go get some of that nice food," she said.

I nodded and we walked into the house together.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The doctors discharged me from the hospital the day after the funeral, and I returned to my grandmother's house. My father had been staying in a hotel across the street from the hospital, but he checked out and went with me to 39 Upton Street for the two days we had before our flight back to California. My grandmother put him in the room that Harold Davenport had told me about, the one at the top of the stairs that the old Cape Verdean man had last occupied. The only other empty rooms were Benny's and the room my mother had used. I slept twelve hours the first night, unaware of anything that may have been going on in the house, and awakened the next morning feeling somewhat like myself for the first time in days. My father and my grandmother were already up, and probably had been for hours. When I shuffled into the kitchen they were sitting at the table smoking cigarettes and drinking coffee and the silence between them felt like it hadn't been disturbed for a long time. Breakfast had come and gone, I could see, by the dishes piled in the sink. I wondered if my father had taken my place as busboy.

I was hungry, the first time I had felt really hungry since the fire. My grandmother made a breakfast just for me and sat and watched as I ate it without saying a word. My father told me to slow down and enjoy the food, but I was too hungry to oblige him.

"Let him eat the way he wants," my grandmother said good naturedly. "He don't get Portagee food everyday."

"Here I do," I said, looking up, and they both laughed.

When I was done, I started to get up to put my plate in the sink, but my father put his hand on my shoulder. "You take it easy," he said and took my plate away. "You'll have plenty of time to bus tabels when we get home."

He was returning from the sink when the kitchen door opened and Sister Margaret appeared. She was holding two empty mesh sacks, ready to embark on her "charitable mission" of the day. She came halfway to the table and stopped, staring at my father.

"Who the hell is *this* now?" she said. "You some relation to Mr. Poong?"

"This is Frank," my grandmother said. "Rory's father. This is Sister Marget."

"Hello, Sister," my father said.

Sister Margaret looked at my father, then at me, then back to my father. "Oh," she said. "Yeah. I can see the resemblance. How you doing?" I looked at my grandmother and she smiled a sly smile. Sister Margaret ambled to the table and sat down next to my grandmother, where my father had just been sitting. "Missed breakfast!" she said. "Ain't hungry anyway. Awful sad about your girl. I didn't go to the funeral because I don't go in for all that *praying* and *carrying on* and whatnot. All my people back in South Carolina were into all

that jumping around and yelling 'Jesus!' shit, but I don't go in for it." She reached out, still holding one of the bags, and patted my grandmother's hand where it rested on the table. "I just wanted you to know, sister, that I'm awful sorry."

"It was a nice funeral," my grandmother said.

"They're nice as long as they ain't mine," Sister Margaret said. Then she pushed herself up from the table with a grunt. "You going to be okay now? How about your other boy? Them folks upstairs said he was mixed up in that big fire down Roxbury way."

My grandmother stared at her coffee cup and scratched at the tabletop. She shrugged. "He's just off on one of his wild times," she said, "like he does sometimes. He'll turn up sooner or later." She glanced up at me and then turned to Sister Margaret. "He'll be showing up."

"Okay, then," Sister Margaret said. "I got to get going. Got plenty of work to do before the day's over. Got to get all the way to Mattapan and Jamaica Plains and all them places out that way." She turned to my father. "Mr. Frank, you got a good hardworking boy here. Nice to meet you." She leaned toward me. "I'm sorry about your mama. You're a strong young man. We all get to be orphans in this world, just some of us sooner than others. You remember that."

"Yes, ma'am," I said.

"Alright," she said and slapped me gently on the shoulder. She limped out down the hall and left us there in the quiet kitchen.

My grandmother didn't go to the airport to see us off. "Too much traffic," she said. "And you gotta go in that tunnel under the water? Nah nah." So we said our goodbyes in her kitchen, hugging awkwardly, and she put some money in my hand, a small wad of bills which I shoved in my pocket without inspecting. "That's your pay," she said.

I felt strange about leaving. This wasn't the place for me, I knew -- I needed to go home and resume life with my father -- but my grandmother seemed so much older now, so much more alone. She moved slowly in the days after the funeral and frequently said she was tired and it looked and felt as though the kitchen and the rest of the house had grown larger around her. At meals everyone was subdued, ruled by a silence that was unnatural for that place. She didn't have to perform her usual role. She seemed to be fading.

"I'll call you when we get home," I said.

"Call person-to-person and ask for Rory," she said. "That way I'll know it's you and we won't have to pay."

I wasn't intending simply to exchange information, but I said that's what I would do.

"You just be a good boy," she said. "Listen to Frank. He's a good man."

She and my father shook hands, and then my father and I carried our bags down the hallway and out the door to the cab outside. I lingered on the sidewalk as the cabbie put our luggage in the trunk and my father got in the back. Eduardo had called yesterday and told me he would come by to say goodbye, but it didn't look like he was going to come. I knew that if I didn't see him today I might not ever see him again. Even if I didn't, I had the film we had shot and I promised him I would develop and edit it and send it back to him, although I didn't know what he would use to project it. I waited another minute and then got in the cab beside my father. As we drove off, Harold Davenport and Mr. Milo Poong came out on the stoop and waved goodbye.

The China Star was closed the week my father was in Massachusetts. The evening we got back we dropped our suitcases at the apartment and then he took me down to the restaurant to "get things ready" for tomorrow. When we pulled up in front of the store I saw people inside.

"Who's that?" I asked.

"Just Delores and Reynaldo," my father said. "Come on."

We got out of the car and I stood for a few seconds on the sidewalk, looking up and down the street. I expected, I guess, to see that something had changed on Broadway Avenue as things had changed inside me, but it was still

the same quiet street, nearly deserted at eight in the evening. The day's dry heat still hung in the air and felt good on my skin.

When I opened the door Delores said "Surprise!" and gave me a big hug. There was a cake on one of the tables with Welcome Home on it in big letters and a couple of candles. Reynaldo flashed me a peace sign and grinned. His eyes were glassy and red. "Little Dude!" he said.

We had cake and ice cream and I answered questions about my three weeks in Boston. I described my grandmother and her house and the boarders and what had happened the first night I was there. I didn't do justice to any of the stories, but in the weeks that followed I got better at telling them. Delores, being a good Catholic, was scandalized by the story of Sister Margaret and made the sign of the cross when I finished telling of her charity scam. She wanted to know about my mother and I told her everything except for the heroin and when I told about how she had died, she started crying and hugging me and calling me a "poor thing." Reynaldo smiled through everything I said.

I didn't say anything about the fire at the Starlight Club. My father and I had talked about that on the way home and he had said that he didn't think there was anything about that story worth sharing. It was a bad thing that had happened, any way you looked at it, and to some people, telling the story would sound like bragging about it or trying to make it something it wasn't. Only four people knew about what had happened to me -- DeRonda, my grandmother,

my father and I – and it should stay that way. When it came time to explain my concussion and my fractured cheekbone, I told the story DeRonda had first made up – that I had gone to the club to confront Bobby Vieira about what had happened to my mother, and that he had hit me because I had made him mad. There was nothing in the story about Benny and the fire. It wasn't a lie, exactly, my father said, just a pared-down version of the truth. Enough of the truth, at any rate, for people who didn't need to know everything.

After cake and ice cream, we cleaned up. I got the easy job of emptying out and washing the salt and pepper shakers, while Reynaldo and my father swept and mopped the floors and Delores cleaned the windows out front. None of the shakers seemed to need any cleaning, but I dutifully filled both sides of the sink, emptied out the salt and pepper into their respective wholesale containers and scrubbed away with a bottle brush. It was busy-work but that was okay because it stopped me, at least for a while, of thinking about Boston and all that had happened.

I had washed, rinsed and dried all the shakers and was about to start refilling them when Reynaldo and my father called me out front.

"We forgot to show you the secret weapon," Reynaldo said, his voice conspiratorial. He glanced over his shoulders as though someone might be listening.

"What secret weapon?"

"Until we get the money stuff all straightened out and can open the store in Barton," my father said. Though First Valley Savings and Loan had wanted him to start paying back just the interest on the loan, Larrent had encouraged him to get a lawyer and fight the bank and he had. The lawyer had gotten First Valley to hold tight about the money while he worked on figuring things out. Tony Ramirez hadn't returned, but the lawyer said that was the bank's problem, after all, and not my father's.

"Come on and see," Reynaldo said.

We went out front. An old white van, its doors dented and its fenders spotted with rust, was parked at the curb. "Oh, wait," Reynaldo said. "I forgot." He ducked inside the van and pulled out a magnetic sign about two feet square. "Can't forget the advertising." He affixed the sign to the door and stood back. *China's Shooting Star* was emblazoned on the sign in bright red letters, with a star trailing motion lines above it.

I turned to my father. He smiled and shrugged. "Tell him about it," he said to Reynaldo.

"Well," Reynaldo said, hooking his thumbs in a pair of imaginary suspenders, "if Barton customers can't come to the China Star, the China Star will come to them. This here is our restaurant on wheels!"

When I laughed, both Reynaldo and my father gave me sour looks. Delores put her hand on my shoulder. "I'm with you, Rory," she said.

"You're laughing now," Reynaldo said, "but when business picks up and we're making fifty deliveries a night, we'll see who's laughing."

"What do you do, though?" I asked.

"That's the cool part, man," Reynaldo said. He yanked the door open to reveal stainless steel serving trays bolted to the van's floor. "Your dad here knows about 99% certain what kinds of things people order every night, so we load up with the top five sellers and the usual stuff, you know, the white rice and the fried rice and the egg rolls and stuff, and I head to Barton!" He made a dramatic gesture in the direction of Barton with his arm. "Then I kind of just cruise around town and wait for the calls to come in."

"How can you get calls? You can't put a phone in your car."

"CB radio," my father said.

"Like trucks use?" I said.

"Yeah, man," Reynaldo said. "See, people call in from Barton to the China Star, and then someone here calls me up on the radio and gives me the order." He reached into the van and pulled out a stack of take-out containers. "I fill the order and take it right over and they get their food in, like, five minutes!"

I laughed again. "Cool!"

My father shrugged. "We don't know if it's going to work out," he said. "But it's worth a try."

"Where'd you get the van?"

"We got the insurance money for the house. There was some left over, so we got the van and the stuff to go inside. The van was pretty cheap since it's almost ten years old, and the restaurant stuff I got from this place in Stockton that went out of business."

I asked the question that was foremost in my mind. "What do I get to do?"

"You are the homebase CB operator," Reynaldo said. "See, your dad does the cooking, Delores does the waitressing here, and I'm in Barton cruising around and making deliveries. So you're in charge of answering the phone and calling in the orders."

I pictured Reynaldo riding around in the van, smoking a joint and forgetting to turn the CB radio on, but I didn't say anything. My father would not want to hear that. I don't know what I expected, but it was something more exciting than this. After what I had seen and done the last three weeks, the prospect of sitting and answering a phone seemed almost childish. Using the CB would be fun for a while, but it would probably get old soon.

"Maybe I could go with you and help deliver stuff."

"Maybe once in a while," my father said. "But on the busy nights, you'll have to be here. We can't afford to hire anyone else, not until we get this money thing straightened out."

"What's going to happen when Reynaldo has to go back to college?" I asked.

"That's next month," my father said. "I'm just worried about next week."

Reynaldo grinned. "I know I'll be hard to replace, but maybe somebody will come along to captain *China's Shooting Star*," Reynaldo said. He tucked his long hair behind his ears. "I'm the one who named the van. Hey, come on for a ride. That okay, Frank?"

"Sure."

I climbed in beside Reynaldo and he started the van. It grumbled to life, vibrating under us, and he glanced over at me. "Fasten your seatbelt and hang on, man." I snapped my seatbelt in place and we heaved away from the curb with a backfire that made me flinch and involuntarily raise my hands to protect my head.

Reynaldo hooted. "The Shooting Star is on the loose!"

"Let's just go check things out real quick," my father said. We were driving toward the apartment. I didn't know what he meant until he turned west on Bellevue Road rather than east.

"Are we going to the house?"

"Yeah. Been away a week, I don't know what they've been doing. You got to keep after contractors, people like that. Sometimes they agree to do too many different jobs at the same time, and they end up doing a half-assed job on everything."

Going to our house meant going by Ryan's house too. I hadn't asked my father what had happened to Ryan because I didn't expect him to know, and, even if he did, I was sure he wouldn't react well to being asked about him. A small knot grew in my stomach and intensified as we drove.

It was twilight. The horizon to the west was fringed with a pinkish orange, like a thin crust. Above it a band of bright blue merged imperceptibly with sapphire and indigo. I hadn't seen the horizon or a sunset in weeks, just the lengthening shadows of evening, then the sky above darkening over and the few faint stars of the city nightscape appearing. I turned in my seat and looked out the windows at the nearly black sky to the east and the bright stars everywhere.

"You can hardly see the stars in Boston," I said.

"Too many lights in the city," my father said. "When I first came stateside for basic training we came in through San Francisco at night. I looked up at the sky and only saw a couple of stars and thought my eyes were going bad."

"I like it better like this," I said.

As we turned down our street, I saw the streetlight at the edge of our yard and Mr. Henderson's and kept my eyes on it. The dark lumps and boxlike shapes in our driveway I saw became wheelbarrows and neat piles of wood when we pulled up out front. Where the garage and the kitchen and part of the living room had been, the workers had erected frames of two by fours and

trusses that looked like the models we had made in the sixth grade out of popsicle sticks and glue. A strong wind could blow it all down, it seemed; I was glad it wasn't March or April, when the winds blew, sometimes in gusts so hard the topsoil on farms was swept into swirling clouds that screened the sun.

"Looks like a skeleton, huh?" my father said. "Like a big fish or something."

"It doesn't look very strong."

"Get the flashlight out of the glove compartment," he said. "Come on."

I got the flashlight and let my father lead the way up the driveway so I could look over my shoulder at Ryan's house without him noticing. The Azio house was dark.

The workers weren't very neat; not only were there pieces of wood and sawdust everywhere, but cigarette butts, soda bottles and wrappers from candy bars. We collected the trash and put it in a small bucket that was full of wood scraps and nails. The cement floor in the garage had been torn up and reset; as my father stepped over the threshold from the driveway and played the flashlight along the floor, I could see cat pawprints and squiggles where some kids from the neighborhood probably scratched their names with a stick. My father stopped in the middle of the floor and shined the light along the wall studs and then up into the trusses over our heads.

"Maybe we can keep it neater this time," he said.

"What about all the stuff we had in here?"

"Insurance. They'll replace everything we had, but some of that stuff we never paid for, eh? So I don't know what to do exactly."

He turned the light toward the kitchen and we could see through it into the living room beyond, the space criss-crossed by shadows thrown by the two-by-fours. For a second I expected to see things in the house, cabinets or appliances in the kitchen, our sofa in the living room. The emptiness surprised me and I realized a whole new dimension to the fire I hadn't considered before. I started counting the things that would have to be replaced to make the house the way it had been.

"Everything's going to stay the same," my father said. He stood in the middle of the kitchen and panned the room with the flashlight. "Stove, sink, refrigerator. They're going to put in a garbage disposal in the sink because a lot of them come that way now."

The plywood subfloor sagged beneath our feet as we walked. I hesitated at first, but when I saw my father's lack of concern I followed him into the living room. He stood to one side and shined the flashlight up into the part of the roof that had been removed and was now a set of evenly spaced trusses. The stars looked somehow bigger, framed by the network of two-by-fours.

"All gone," he said softly. "Fire is a powerful thing. Just like that."

I looked down at my feet, chastised. The feelings I had about fire now weren't the sensations of power and excitement from the days when Ryan and I

played our little games with our toys, but fear and shame. I remembered the things Benny had burned in Boston, the sad sight of charred timbers and blasted bricks.

I started to speak, then took a deep breath and tried to make the words sound right in my head before I said them. "I didn't tell the truth," I finally said. He didn't look at me, just kept staring up through the trusses. "About the fire. It wasn't my idea. It was Ryan's. I said it was my idea because I didn't want him to get in trouble with his father because his father is always hitting on him."

"I figured that," he said. "I could tell he was bad news when they moved in." He turned and looked at me. I couldn't see his face in the darkness.

"No, Dad, it was my fault. I -- I could have stopped them. I just let them do it. I went along with them." I waited for him to say something. When he didn't, the silence pressed down on me and I had to fill it somehow so I kept talking. "I didn't want them to think I was a sissy or chicken or anything, so I let them."

"What?" my father said. "So he would still be your friend? Huh?"

I opened my mouth but I didn't say anything. Maybe, in some part of me, I had known this all along. Hearing it now, though, coming from him, made me feel stupid.

"You can't make people like you," he said, his voice terse. "You can't make yourself white or tall or good-looking. You can't make yourself someone's friend

by doing what they want to do or by lying for them. You are who you are. Is that why you burned things – so he would like you?"

I shook my head. "No." I couldn't put into words how fire made me feel – powerful, dangerous, *bad*. It was *fun*, bad fun. Stupid, I knew now. "No," I said again, because he was only partially right. "It was because I got to do something. I could do it, I could make things change. All the time – all the time all we do is just – just nothing, we just run a restaurant and people make fun of us and we let them and at school I'm afraid that people won't like me because I'm brown. I feel like a chicken. But when we burned something we could just *do it*."

"Rory." He put his hand on my shoulder. "Is that what you think we are – chicken?"

"Sometimes."

He sighed and looked away and we stood there in silence so long, looking up at the stars, that I began to feel unsteady, a kind of vertigo. When he spoke I looked back at his darkened figure and the dizziness passed.

"Mama Reponte used to laugh when we would come back from parties with black eyes and split lips. 'You no can beat the world,' she used to say. 'You fight one, fight two, fight three; when it going end?' The people who want to fight and make trouble, that's all they know. If you get on their level, that's where you stay. Chinese people, Black people, Mexican, Cape Verdean, we all

get picked on and its usually by people who don't have anything themselves. Usually poor white people or ones with no education. Why? They are afraid and jealous that we will make something for ourselves. The people who mess up the store, maybe the kids who make fun of you, they won't ever have anything; all they can do is destroy. They may win now, for the time being, but that isn't what life is about. I know it's hard for you now because you're thirteen. Every day is like the world to you." He looked back up at the stars. "But everything is ahead. I don't want you to think that fighting back or doing something so they won't think you're a coward is the way to go, because if you let other people push your buttons, they always will. Maybe they throw stuff at the store or call up in the middle of the night and say things; maybe they pick you last for baseball or the girls don't want to dance with you. But you will leave here and go on and many of them won't. Out there the people who worry if you're a chicken or a coward aren't worth your time. None of this makes sense to you, I know, but you have to trust me. I didn't understand Mama Reponte when she said those things, but I learned that she was right. Some things in life you can't be told, you have to learn." He turned in a slow circle and shined the light around the house, moving from the frame to the familiar walls that had remained. The light hit the living room rear window and the reflection blinded me. "You understand?"

"Yeah, I guess."

He flicked off the light. "Okay. Let's go ho -- let's go to the apartment."

We entered The Furnace, what people in towns up and down the Central Valley called the longest, hottest part of summer when the temperatures rose into the 110s for a week at a time and the air itself felt roasting hot on your skin. Air conditioners ran day and night and PG&E would conduct rolling brown outs to keep the whole power grid from going down. People who forgot to leave their car windows open a crack could find their windshields blown out from the force of the expanding air inside. The hospital in Baron would fill with migrant workers suffering from heat stroke. Those who couldn't afford to pay the admission at the town pool took their chances in the canals with their spillways and strong currents, and every week the sheriff's department or the fire department would pull a drowned kid from a canal. In the vineyards, farmers would harvest around the clock because a day's delay could turn table grapes into raisins. On the outskirts of town you could hear the drone of machinery and the sound of fieldhands' voices in the blackest part of the night.

And in the heart of the Furnace we would have the Ferris Jamboree, the all-day party in Ralston Park to celebrate the founding of the town in 1871. The day would start with a parade of floats, old cars, marching bands and horses and end with fireworks at the high school football stadium. Throughout the

afternoon the park became a bazaar of food and game booths and tables where people sold crafts.

The Hawaiian Club had one of the most popular food booths at the park. My father was the main cook for the club, so the days preceding the Jamboree were tiring ones for him. This year not only did he have to run the China Star and cook more meals for the delivery service to Barton, but he had to meet with the lawyer and the construction people working on the house, and oversee the cooking for the Jamboree booth. There was extra work for me, too. The van had to be cleaned out each day and the delivery money totalled up and added to the daily deposit. Since Reynaldo was now doing deliveries from mid-afternoon on, I not only had to answer the phones and operate the CB, but do the dishes, too. I would take a book along with me for the slow times; sometimes I would bring the movie camera. But usually there was little time for either. And I thought at the time that my father was keeping me busy to keep me out of trouble. Who could blame him. I know he didn't want me to feel watched, but sometimes that was just the way I felt when he would see me sitting at the stool at the sink reading an Edgar Rice Burroughs novel and ask me to clean a countertop I had wiped down just an hour before, or to sweep the sidewalk in front of the restaurant for the third time that day. I know now that he was trying to keep me from thinking.

At night, though, when I tried to sleep, I found myself staring up into the dark, listening to the sound of the fan and the far-off farm machines laboring in the dark. My mind flitted between Massachusetts and home, my family there and my father. I saw the rooms at 39 Upton Street, the trestles of the elevated train tracks, the Common and the locations on Eduardo's map. I saw Benny. The papers had said only two bodies had been found in the debris from the fire, Bobby Vieira's and a guy who worked for him. It was possible that there was another body buried under all the bricks and burnt furniture and beams; the paper said it would take weeks before the site was fully excavated. The paper didn't say how the two men had died, whether they were burned or shot, but it didn't matter. They were dead because of what Benny had done and what I had failed to do. In a way it would be better if Benny were dead, too, because otherwise he would be getting away with causing their deaths and would be out there somewhere. But I didn't want him dead. He was still my brother. There had to have been times before when he and my mother got along better than what I saw, when they were more like a mother and a son. I didn't have memories of times like that, but he did, and if he were still alive he could tell me what she was like when she was younger and wasn't on heroin. My grandmother knew these things, but she couldn't help me know how to feel as a son, if indeed I ever would feel anything like that. Now I just had intentions to feel that way. It was like the part of the Mass called the Prayers of the

People. The priest would go through this list of things and people we were supposed to pray about, most of which was foreign to me and to other kids. I didn't know this bishop we prayed for every week, but I did know that I was supposed to feel something about him as I prayed, and that to not feel and to not pray were probably sins.

Benny moved through my sleepy thoughts like a dark avenger. I imagined him shooting Bobby Vieira and felt a shameful thrill as the bullets entered Vieira's body and he crumpled to the floor and the flames swept over him. I saw myself holding the gun and pulling the trigger and thought it was because I loved my mother that I would do such a thing. But it wasn't the demands of love that I was answering as I indulged those dark fantasies, but the same voice that urged me to burn things and kill birds, to desire to surrender myself to something dark, evil, destructive. Maybe that's what Benny listened to as well.

I saw my mother's ruined face, the dark sunken eyes, her tight-drawn mouth, and tried to reconcile it with the face I had studied when I had held those old pictures, but it was like trying to make sense of a multiple exposure photograph, the images cancelling each other out or leaving a jumble in my mind, a confusion of features that became my grandmother's face, too, and sometimes Benny's. And what I felt about her was a muddle, too, a painful mixture of pity, anger, regret, shame. She hadn't been the woman I was waiting for, but a disappointment, a waste. I wouldn't ever be able to look at

those pictures of her dancing or taking me for a walk without seeing her nodding in the chair in my grandmother's living room, high on heroin, or frantic for Bobby to give her next fix. I felt cheated. When she had been a mystery there was the possibility that she could really be all those things I imagined she could be -- glamorous, rich, famous; when I saw her hollowed out cheeks where she had lost teeth and the marks on her arms, all those fantasies were gone and I was left with only what she had become.

I didn't tell my father that I had shot film of her. I didn't know how he would react. He had not seen her for eight years and then he had seen her dead. I didn't know if seeing a few minutes of her alive, as she was at the end of her life, would sadden him or give him something he needed. When I got the film back I tried to find a time when I was alone in the apartment to watch it myself, but those times never happened. Finally, after about a week of waiting, I crept out of bed one night and set up the projector on the floor in the kitchen.

The first roll turned out to be of Eduardo. As I had feared, there was not enough light. Eduardo's dark, smiling face filled the two-foot square frame on the wall and then his dim figure, barely distinguishable from the darkened background of buildings, moved down streets and alleyways. The shots of him pointing to the ground or down an alley were either too short or too long. When I got my editing machine at the end of the summer I could write down

descriptions of each place and film them and splice them into the movie. Then I would send it on to Eduardo and he would be the only person to ever see it.

I put Eduardo's roll aside and loaded the second roll, my fingers fumbling with the celluloid, afraid that I was making too much noise and that my father would hear me and awaken. But the air conditioner was humming loudly and I could barely hear the sound of the film as I started the projector.

The screen flashed white for a few seconds and then went dim and I had to strain to see the faint image of my mother on the bed as she slept. The minute or so of footage from the bedroom seemed to take much longer to run, the sameness of the dark outlines stretching the seconds out. The bed was a vague rectangle, the slow movements of my mother's arms like the turning of fish in muddy water. Then the screen flashed again and I was looking at her in the kitchen from my grandmother's bedroom.

I saw her on the wall, drowsy with sleep, reacting to what my grandmother said to her, trying to get herself something. It meant nothing, none of it did. It couldn't answer the one question I had always wanted to know: did she love me? I hadn't had the courage to ask her that one question those few days we had been together. Instead I had spent time behind my camera, watching. I blamed myself for that and it would be years before I could accept that it was she who should have said something; it was her place as an adult, as a mother. That night, though, I didn't blame her. The film ended and flapped on the

takeup reel. The square of light blazed against the wall. I turned the projector off and sat on the floor in the dark.

I heard my father behind me but I didn't turn around. He turned on the light. "I heard the projector," he said. I nodded. "Your grandmother said she was around a few days," he said.

"Yeah."

"Did you talk to her much?"

"No," I said. "Most of the time she was sleeping or she was ..." I didn't want to say the word heroin.

"She never used to be like that," he said. "I don't know what happened."

"She said that sometimes she still danced," I said, remembering what she had told my grandmother.

"That's good."

"Do you think she was there all the time and my grandmother knew?"

"I don't know, Rory. Maybe she was. What difference does it make?"

"I was just thinking that she could have called or something. Did you still love her?"

"Yeah, sure, I guess." He opened the refrigerator and got a soda. "But I gave up thinking that she was going to come back. I knew she wouldn't. She wanted to live the life she had before you or me came along."

"I was thinking before that maybe she would come back. I just wanted to see her, I guess. I took this film, but none of it turned out very well."

"It's fine. At least you have something."

"Dad?"

"Yeah."

"I -- how come you never told me stuff."

"Hmm?"

"How come you never told me I was Cape Verdean? How come you always said I was just Portuguese?"

He sighed and sat down at the table. "You know what Cape Verdean is, right?"

"Yeah."

"I wasn't trying to hide nothing from you." He drummed his fingers on the table. "I just wanted you to find out who you were before you had to think you had to be something or somebody. You know how *haoles* are about things. You know how they think about colored people. I don't know, I thought if you knew you were Cape Verdean, it would make you feel funny about yourself, about who you were. You feel different now that you know?"

I thought about that for a few seconds. "No," I said. "I feel like me."

The morning of the Jamboree my father got up at four thirty and made steak and eggs and hash browns and orange juice for breakfast and then woke me up. It was an extravagant meal, because even though we would be working with food all day, it might be the only real meal we got. He had warned me that we would be getting up early and that it would be a long, full day, but I was still shocked when I looked at the clock in the kitchen and saw what time it was. "Heck," he said, "when we were kids and went surfing we'd already be up an hour by now. No time to waste when the big waves are coming in."

"We're not surfing," I said. "We're just going to be selling food."

"Yeah, well maybe I'll teach you to surf someday."

My first impulse upon coming into the kitchen had been to get the table ready for the boarders. Even though I had been home for two weeks I still got confused occasionally in the morning. I had told my father about my duties at 39 Upton Street. He had approved of my grandmother's regimen for me. "Didn't get into any trouble, did you?" he said. I remembered drinking wine with Benny and the time I smoked some of his marijuana, but no one knew about that and I hadn't gotten in trouble, so I could answer yes, though I felt a little guilty in doing so.

We had heard from my grandmother a few times since I had come home. The phone would ring at the restaurant and I'd pick it up and she'd say "Hey, how you feel?" It was her way of saying hello. These conversations would only

last two or three minutes. As long as we were okay, that was all that mattered. I tried to get her to tell me about what was going on in the house, but she would just say "Okay," when I asked her how the boarders were doing. I was afraid to ask her about Benny because I didn't want her to tell me that the police had found his body in the debris of the Starlight Club. I waited for her to tell me that he had come back or that he had called from somewhere and was okay. She never said anything.

I had two jobs that day, recording the event with my camera and a 35mm camera someone in the club lent me and helping serve food in the booth. While the booths were being set up, I sat around and halfheartedly watched through my camera lens. I saw other kids my age with their parents, most of them standing around, hands in their pockets, arms folded across their chests. The park rang with the sound of hammers and electric drills and portable radios. After the booth was up one of the men ran the heavy gauge extension cords to a power boxes the electric company had set up and plugged in the deep fat fryers for the egg rolls and the warming trays for the pork and the teriyaki beef and the rice. I started seeing kids from school as the crowd grew bigger. We waved to each other, said "Hey," that was about it. Seeing them made me think again about high school, and that started the butterflies up in my stomach. I had stopped thinking about what I was back in Boston;

surrounded by other people of color and seeing so many Cape Verdeans had made the color of my skin something I was comfortable with, something that was, essentially, irrelevant. Now, seeing my white classmates, it came back to me: in school the color of my skin would be important, perhaps the important thing. I looked down at my hands. I couldn't remember what shade they had been at the beginning of summer, but I knew they were darker. I pulled back the wristband on my watch. The thin strip of skin beneath was many shades lighter. If I was that color all over there would be no problem.

I started seeing girls I knew. They moved along the sunlight-dappled sidewalk in their shorts and halter tops and short skirts. For the pretty ones I felt that sweet, confused ache of arousal and longing and dread that had only this past year become so powerful. I imagined dates with them, kisses, caresses, but I didn't know how that would ever happen. I waved nervously to the girls who saw me, but I couldn't do anything more than that. I wouldn't know where to begin. They waved back, smiled and went on their way.

And then I saw the girl I had seen the day of the fire. She was with some other girls I knew, but it was as though they were invisible. She was taller than they and poised, moving with that same grace she had had on her bike. Her hair looked different. She had cut it so that it came just to her shoulders, and when she turned her head it swung gently, framing her face. I could imagine the feel of that hair, the smell of shampoo; I thought of how it would brush my

lips if I kissed it. She was tanned, darker than the other girls, almost as dark as I was, a warm golden brown. If we held hands, how would her hand look in mine, her fingers against my fingers? A deep pang of longing spread through me. I didn't know her name, but she would be going to school with me soon and I could find out then. After that, I didn't know what I would do.

She and her friends came up the sidewalk toward our booth, then turned and cut across the street. I watched her walk, watched her hair swing, saw the contours of her legs and the faint sway of her hips. She didn't walk like the others, short-stepped, arms limp at her sides, but with longer strides and with her arms swinging. Then she was gone in the crowd.

My father arrived with the van from the China Star and we unloaded the food into the warming trays and dropped the first set of egg rolls in the deep fat fryer. I used the movie camera for the first time that day. The men who were going to work the first shift mugged when I turned the lens toward them. Even though business at the restaurant would be slow because of the Jamboree, we couldn't afford to close, so after he had seen all the food safely into the trays and fryers my father went back downtown. "Make sure you get down there by dinnertime," he said. "Parade's started," someone announced. The Jamboree was underway.

It was near noon when I saw Ryan. I had put down the cameras and was working at the front of the booth taking orders. It was so hot people were walking around looking stunned, holding wet handkerchiefs and scarves to their necks and faces. They clustered around the booth, trying to get into the shade, which just made it hotter. Standing inside the booth with all the warming and frying equipment was like lying down out on the street. My skin felt scorched.

The crowd at the front of the booth cleared for an instant as a fat man turned away with his plate of food. I saw Ryan standing twenty feet from the booth with some other kids. He looked the same, except maybe that his hair was longer. Ryan jerked his head and flipped his hair back, then turned and looked in my direction. Our eyes met and we stared at each other. He was too far away for me to yell to him. I raised my hand to wave, but the crowd closed between us and I couldn't see him. I took some more orders and waited. Ten minutes had passed and he hadn't come over. I told the guys working at the booth that I had to go see someone and went looking for him.

I squeezed my way through the shoulder-to-shoulder crowd, ducking between people, slipping between them sideways. I had no idea what I was going to say to him when I caught up to him; part of me wondered why I wanted to talk to him at all. When I reached the tree where Ryan had been standing, he was gone. I didn't know which direction he had gone, so I set out across the

street, hoping for a chance glimpse of his hair or his face. Out in the open the sun was heavy on my head and I felt my skin tingling.

I found him fifteen minutes later just when I was about to give up. He was walking ahead of me with three other guys toward the north end of the park. The crowd was thinner here; once I saw him I didn't lose track of him. My first impulse was to call out, but I didn't, afraid that I'd be yelling and he wouldn't hear me and people would think I was just making noise. I jogged after him.

I was close enough to hear them talking before I said anything. Ryan and one of the guys were talking about motorcycles. Ryan mentioned his brother Nick and the Hells Angels in Oakland.

"Ryan."

They stopped and turned around. Brett and Donny were with him. I didn't recognize the other kid. Brett sneered. Donny looked around him, then pulled a pack of Marlboros from his jeans and slid a cigarette into his mouth. "Hey," Ryan said.

"Hey."

Ryan took a cigarette that Donny offered and talked with it dangling from his lip. "I thought you moved away."

"No. I just went a way for a while."

"Why'd you come back?" Brett said. The kid I didn't know snorted.

"I live here," I said. "I was just with my grandmother for a little while."

"She a Chinawoman?" Donny said.

"She's my other grandmother."

"I see them working on your house every day," Ryan said.

"They're almost finished," I said.

"Are you the guy from the fire?" the third kid asked. When I said yes he snorted again.

"He's the guy we told youa bout on the fence," Donny said.

I felt myself blush at the reminder of how I had acted that day. I wanted to hit Donny in the nose. But then Brett probably would have hit me, maybe the other guy would have, too. I remembered what Benny said about fighting the fights you had to fight or wanted to fight; this was neither.

"I got back a couple of weeks ago," I said. I had been expecting Ryan to be excited to see me, but he didn't give me a soul handshake or punch me in the arm or say it was cool that I was back. I started saying the first things that came to mind to fill the silence. "I've been working at the restaurant every day. We have a delivery service in Barton now."

Ryan nodded and lit his cigarette and passed the lighter to Donny.

"Where you guys going?" I asked.

"This guy's house," Ryan said.

"Yeah," the third kid said. "We gotta go." He sounded anxious to leave, but he didn't move.

I wanted Ryan to thank me for sticking up for him; I wanted him to apologize for bringing the other guys to the garage that day. There was nothing but silence.

"What did you do while I was gone?" I asked.

"Things," Ryan said, taking a drag off his cigarette and then blowing a few misshapen smoke rings. "Stuff."

"Yeah, stuff and things," Brett said. "We burned things." The new kid laughed.

"What happened after the fire?" I asked.

"Which one?" Donny said.

"You burned other things?"

"What'd I just say, brainiac?" Brett said.

"Shut up," Ryan told him.

"Come on, man, we gotta go," the new kid said.

"Yeah," Ryan said. He started walking again and everyone followed him. I kept pace with him, but Brett and Donny positioned themselves on either side of him on the sidewalk. I had to walk in the gutter.

"After the fire at my house," I said.

Ryan grinned. "What do you think? My father beat the shit out of me."

"But didn't the police tell him that I said it was my fault?"

Brett snorted. "You're such a big man. You're the big hero!"

"He doesn't care what the police say," Ryan said. He held his hand up as though he was giving a speech. "Every day is a good day for an ass whipping!"

"What do you think," Brett said, stepping close to me, "you're a hero or something? Nobody cares what you say. We don't need you to lie for us. Do you think we're going to be your friends?"

"We don't want you to be our friend," Donny said.

"Yeah, Chinaman halfbreed," the new kid said.

"Shut up," I said.

"Are you man enough to do it?" the kid said.

"He's a pussy," Brett said. "Everybody knows that."

We turned up a side street. We had only gone two blocks from the park, but the neighborhood had already changed. This was the part of town where people didn't mow their lawns and left car parts strewn all over their driveways. Delores called it the white trash section. The kids I knew in school from this neighborhood were always getting into trouble. The people who lived here didn't like Blacks or Mexicans. I started to slow down.

"Where are you going, Ryan?"

"None of your business, pussy," the new kid said. "Someplace we don't want you."

"Told you he's a pussy," Brett said.

We stopped. We had been moving in the shade for the most part but now we were out in the punishing sun. Up and down the street the doors to houses were open. In the dark doorways I could feel people looking out at us, though I saw no one.

"You're the pussy," I said. "You're the one who ran away after the fire. You started it and you ran away. You, too, Donny. Me and Ryan stayed there, but you guys ran away."

"Shut up," Brett said. He took a step toward me. I raised my fists. Tactical retreat. This was stupid.

From the next house up the block, a sickly green flat-roof with the stucco falling off, the screen door opened and a long-haired man in a tank top and jeans stuck his head out. "Hey! What the fuck are you guys doing? I ain't waiting no more."

We all turned toward the man. Before I could react Brett took a half step forward and pushed me in the chest with both hands. I stumbled back on the sidewalk and fell over, scraping my elbows and my palms as I went down. When I tried to get up, the new kid pushed me from the side and I went down on my knees.

"Leave him alone," Ryan said.

I looked up and saw him standing between the new kid and me. Donny and Brett were standing farther down the sidewalk.

"Let's kick his ass," the kid said.

"Eddie's waiting," Donny said. "Come on."

"Yeah," Brett said. "We don't have time for him."

Donny and Brett turned their backs on us and started across the lawn of the green house. The guy in the doorway shook his head and went back inside. The new kid made another move toward me. I stood up, my hands at my side.

"Come on, man," Ryan said, leaning into the kid.

The kid leered at me and pointed. "Next time I'm going to kick your ass," he said. "Next time, you're dead meat." He brushed off Ryan's hand and turned away.

I was breathing hard, clenching my fists until my knuckles hurt. I was mad with frustration but I was beyond crying. Be smart, I thought, be smart.

"Go away," Ryan said. "Don't follow me anymore."

"I wasn't *following* you," I said, "I was just trying to talk to you. Who wants to follow you? You're -- you're just going to be like them and like Nick. You're just going to do stupid stuff and get in trouble."

He threw his cigarette into the gutter. "Yeah? And who are you going to be like? Your dad?"

I knew what he meant by that: the Chinaman, the cook at the restaurant, the man who didn't fight back. But that wasn't what I felt, and I remembered

what my father had said the night we had gotten back from Boston, and I realized that he was right.

"Yeah," I said. "And you're going to be just like yours."

Music had started in the green house, the kind of music Ryan liked. The guy named Eddie was shouting something.

"Later, dude," Ryan said. He turned away and crossed the lawn. I watched him go into the house, letting the screen door slam behind him, and waited there on the sidewalk for something else to happen. My elbows were burning and my palms were imbedded with bits of gravel. Twisting my arms, I looked at my elbows. Where the skin was rubbed off there were disks of white and seeping slowly up through the white came fine bright drops of blood.

I walked back to the park feeling my elbows and palms burn. No one said anything to me at the booth when I resumed my position at the front and started taking orders again. The crowds were thick all day. Midway through the afternoon Reynaldo came down in the van with more food and we restocked. The adults took time off to eat and go visit the other booths, but I kept working right through the day. I wasn't hungry.

It was five before I realized it. I heard the faraway gonging of the St. Anthony's bell and checked my watch. "I gotta go," I said to Kimo Fernandez,

who was in charge. He was busy preparing a plate for someone. He didn't acknowledge me, but I left anyway. I had a twenty minute walk to the restaurant.

I walked in the sun on the east side of the street. The hot dry air felt good on my skin. I counted my steps and didn't think about anything else. When I got to a hundred, I started all over again.

There were no customers at the restaurant. Delores and Reynaldo sat at one of the front tables playing cards. I said hi and headed back toward the kitchen. Delores put her cards down. "What happened to you?" she said. "You're skinned up."

"I kind of got into a fight."

"Kind of?"

"This guy pushed me down and that was about it. There were four of them so I didn't do anything."

"Honey, why'd they do that? What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I don't know. They're just jerks."

Delores started to get up from her chair. "Let me help you get cleaned up," she said.

"It's okay. Leave me alone." I tried to say it as nicely as I could. I didn't want to hurt her feelings, but I didn't want her to be fussing over me. She sat back down.

My father was in the kitchen smoking a cigarette. He looked at his watch when he saw me. "You're almost half an hour late."

"I was working at the booth. You can ask Kimo. I forgot."

He put the cigarette out in a coffee can he kept on the floor and craned his neck toward the order bay when the front door opened. "Maybe we'll make five dollars today," he said. He smiled and turned back to me and the smile faded.

"What's wrong?"

I shrugged. "I just -- I saw Ryan," I said. "He was with the other guys, the ones from the fire."

"What happened?"

I started to speak and heard my voice break and I cursed and pressed my palms over my eyes as hard as I could. The tears came but I didn't choke or sputter, just silently cried standing there.

"Tell me," he said.

I told him what had happened. "I'm so stupid," I said. "I can't do anything right."

"CCY!" Delores yelled through the order bay.

My father crossed the floor and put his arms around me. I started crying again and this time I couldn't help the noise. "Hey," he said, "hey." I hugged him and he closed his arms tight around me and started rocking me. "Hold on," he

said. "I'll be right back. Okay, O-e? Let me just get the order for Delores. I'll be right back."

But he didn't move.

—THE END—